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MOUNTAIN MAGIC

By the same author :

Novels

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT A SOLDIER
FIRST LIGHT
THE FRUIT OF ACTION

MOUNTAIN MAGIC

by

EVE ORME

Illustrated

RICH & COWAN

LONDON :: NEW YORK :: MELBOURNE :: SYDNEY

To my Husband

I have to acknowledge the kindness of the editor of "The Queen" for allowing me to use certain photographs which have been published in that newspaper.

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PREFACE

Somebody once said to me: "Other people's geographical experiences are always boring." This may be true, and yet—when a journey to the mountain heights of the world has become an experience so vivid, so revitalizing that it can never be forgotten, perhaps any writer may be forgiven for wanting to set it down.

The journey of which I write was made in 1926. It may strike some people that a trek made so long ago can be but the faintest of memories, but to me, Ladakh is much more than that. In my mind I can still see the country, the faces of many of its inhabitants, and the villages in which we sometimes pitched our tents.

Writing this book has increased an urge that was driving me to take the road again. Few of us in war-time England can indulge a roving spirit, so I am worse off than I was. Yet comfort can be had from remembering past happiness, reminding one that vital experience is one's own for ever.

Old, detailed diaries and photographs have helped me to recapture those days spent trekking over high mountains, so perhaps I can hope that this book may offer temporary escape to those who, like myself, are uncomfortable when static for too long.

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CHAPTER ONE

IT SURPRISED MY WOMAN FRIENDS WHEN, ROUND A TABLE AT THE SATURDAY club in Calcutta, one steamy May afternoon, I told them that I was going with my husband on a shooting-trip to Ladakh. They asked, "Where is Ladakh?" Everyone asks that, because few people know. Those Britishers who do, are often seemingly impenetrable men who appear so unsociable that they might be suspected of having a secret; either a woman at home who makes the socialites of India seem poor stuff, or perhaps a longing for something that they can't express.

They obtain a permit from the Kashmir government to shoot in Ladakh —permits that are keenly sought. A shooting-block is assigned to them. They undertake not to cross the Tibetan frontier (Ladakh is a comparatively small country—at least, it seems so on the map—between the north-east of Kashmir and Tibet proper); they take three to four months' leave, and depart, seldom with the handicap of a woman travelling with them, and one doesn't see them again until they arrive one day in the club of their up-country station, bronzed and lean, and indefinably renewed.

My husband seemed to think he could do likewise, even though married to me. It was a proposition I had not imagined. Somehow it didn't seem to be in the programme. Yet I had to admit that by instinct and upbringing he was a sportsman. One who had often looked upon the Himalayas from the Indian side, and must have known frustration at being, by a soldier's duties, prevented from exploration of their mysteries. I knew he had sometimes been envious of the bags procured by brother officers. I knew perfectly well that one of his greatest ambitions was to gain a head of the immense ovis ammon (the wild sheep to be found beside the Indus), also one belonging to the graceful Tibetan antelope which comes down to the valley of the Chang Chenmo river during summer months to feed. I had no doubt that such a trip as he now contemplated would be a high light of his life, and that his feet were itching for the road. He was not the stay-at-home type, which is not to say that such a man does not love his home. I had never appreciated the stay-at-home man who accompanies his wife down the High Street of a town helping her to carry parcels. Why, then, should I object to his starting upon such a trip? My objections were far from logical. Only—what could I do with myself whilst he was away?

There were several possibilities. I could rent a house-boat in Srinagar, sharing it with another woman for companionship. Many of my sister Army wives had just such a project in view. "Do come," they said; "it would be fun being there all together." Would it? People's ideas of fun are apt to vary. I could imagine myself sitting in Srinagar like a parcel that has been left, and must remain till called for. Besides, although I like my fellow women, if you take one for a day-in, day-out companionship you have to be so careful. And then—what did one *do* in Srinagar? "But, my dear, it's heavenly," people said. "It's a lotus-eating life. You lounge, you

drift. There are dances—fun. If you get bored you can always go up to Gulmarg and play golf!"

Golf. Golfers golfed when they talked as much as Gurkhas—those wonderful soldiers—Gurkhed. Jarring one's wrists in trying to hit an evilly disposed, evasive white ball was not my idea of evading boredom. Lotus-eating would make me fidgety, especially with all those mountains round me, summoning and beckoning. And if not to Srinagar, then I might go to an ordinary hill station, to exist in which must be much the same as sitting on an immense pimple. I could imagine myself stuck fast there. One of many women who look at every newcomer to the horrid little club with an appraising eye. "Is she more attractive than I, or than I could ever be?" That is the way the thoughts of women are apt to run in hill stations. It is not entirely our fault, because it is what the land of second-rate novels, second-rate clothes and third-rate conversation does to us unless we fight like the devil against it. And in India women often lose their fighting spirit.

I could, of course, go home to England, and buy some new clothes to wear at the race meetings next cold weather, returning to Calcutta with nothing more refreshing than a repetition of various experiences lived through before I ever came to the East, together with a memory of how healthy people looked at home by comparison with the jaded wrecks that late hours, hot weather, malaria, and the everlasting gossip round drink-laden tables bring about in India.

So I said, realizing that the remark would be a bombshell to Noel: "Can't I come with you?"

He looked at me and answered: "Now do be reasonable, old girl."

Most women know what that means; the pointing out of difficulties, the soothing, propitiatory arguments—all that.

He said: "Do you realize that there are no roads in Ladakh—only mountain tracks? That Leh, the capital, lies at over 11,000 feet, and that I must travel higher still? That to reach the country where I can get the heads I want, in the time at my disposal, I shall sometimes have to march as much as twenty miles a day. If you got ill there'd be no way back except the way we went!" (I began to take heart at that "We".) "The shooting-block in the Chang Chenmo Valley, which is my furthest objective, lies at 19,000 feet, and there is such a thing as mountain sickness. You'd have to live on any old food, suffer cold and wind, spoil your skin. You—who have never even slept in a tent, or endured any acute discomfort? Women—ordinary women—don't go to Chang Chenmo."

To speak vulgarly, that put the kibosh on it. Ordinary women! And yet—I knew I could not claim to be anything else. All the same, something—vanity, was it?—made me determined. I'd hate to think it was only vanity, and yet, how many women really know their motives for what they do?

"I'm coming," I said.

Did I by any chance hear the suggestion of a groan? Perhaps. In an effort to comfort, I added: "I swear not to be a nuisance. I promise I won't do anything to hamper you in getting your heads. I won't complain. But I want to come more than anything in the world."

I wondered if he was thinking, "There goes my chance of getting any sport!" I vowed it shouldn't be so. Did I see his brother officers looking at him with something like pity? I'd show them.

Our preparations began. We had to reckon on being away from ordinary food supplies for several weeks. To a great extent—at any rate until we reached the Chang Chenmo Valley, which was beyond all habitation—we could live on the country. No beef is killed in Kashmir on account of the religion of the people. The cow is sacred, but there would be sheep. The idea was, apparently, that one bought one whole, and that one's cook dissected it and cooked it. There would be goats' milk, and local butter. We decided to take also some tins of butter from the Delhi Dairy Farm. We should be able to get eggs and scraggy chickens from the villages we passed. On the other hand, we had to prepare against emergencies. Tinned food must, of course, be taken to keep us going when we were beyond habitation, and also in case of illness. Weight must be considered, because every extra baggage pony would add considerably to the expense of the trek. Flour was essential, so was oil. Our tent would be lighted by the ubiquitous hurricane "butti".* Our cook would bake our bread in the primitive stone oven that cooks in the East know how to make. Whom should we take as cook? That was a question.

To take a plainsman on such a trip was a risk. To employ a Kashmiri cook was to invite robbery. Our bearer at that time was a man of nearly fifty (which is old for an Indian) called Rahim. He had a tough old face, and tremendous "izzat"† in his native cantonment of Meerut, because he, his father, and his grandfather, had all served officers in the Royal Regiment of Artillery, loyally and with credit. People—some people—say that all Indian servants are dishonest. Perhaps I am not one of those clever memsahibs who can't be cheated without knowing it, but I had never found Rahim anything but honest. It seemed he had our interests always at heart. And now he said: "I come with Sahib and Memsahib."

Noel was dubious about this suggestion. "You're old, Rahim, and you may pack up. The trek might kill you. Of course, I'd see you had a 'tat'‡ to ride on, but all the same—the cold. . . ."

Rahim stood there, his rugged face expressionless. "I come. I make bread. I good cook. I come. I in prison once with Sahib Smith in Kut. Smith Sahib—great Sahib."

We knew the story. During the last war he had been taken prisoner as an officer's servant. All the same, that seemed to have little bearing upon how the cold of Ladakh would affect him now in later life. But there was something incalculable about Rahim, and we both knew it. When his mind was made up, one couldn't change it. To take another servant with us as cook and leave him behind in Calcutta would have been the deadliest blow we could have dealt him. I think he would have fought back; arrived at the train, and boarded it.

We gave in, not without a feeling of relief at the idea of having him with us.

We had to think of clothes: against heat, for the Ladakhi sun could burn

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* Lamp. † Standing. ‡ Mountain pony.

in July; against blizzards, and the icy winds that would blow upon the passes. For a man to organize his wardrobe for such a journey is not difficult, but a woman must cut out the frills and get down to business. Again, the expense of pack ponies had to be thought of. Enough of everything must be taken, all weather conditions met and overcome, but there must not be an ounce too much. A thick coat was a necessity. It should cover as much of me as possible, and yet not be too long to ride in. I bought a heavy blanket and had it made up by the battery tailor, padded and lined. Breeches or Jodhpurs? Jodhpurs would be misery if they got wet, and there was no hope of changing. Breeches and boys' knee-length stockings seemed a better proposition. I insisted on silk shirts and pyjamas rather than flannel (and how unknowingly right I was! At a time when we couldn't wash much, it was Noel, not I, who got lice when the coolies dropped them on our bedding and our kit. Lice cuddle up in the seams of flannel, they slip off silk.) "Chaplis," thin leather boots with a sole strapped firmly underneath, so that when stones assemble between the sole and the thinner lining of the boot they can be easily removed; rope-soled shoes; and Gilgit boots, with leather feet and uppers reaching to one's knees, made of the thickest blanket; a fur-lined hat with ear-flaps—all these could be bought in Srinagar. Blankets and bedding were details which did not require much thought. I added eider-downs and hot-water bottles. Then there were cooking utensils and solid fuel, over which water could be boiled for tea. I took an old friend, my Burberry, knowing its wind-proof qualities. Next came something to read. Why read? Because there would be times when Noel would be away most of the day upon the mountains, when I should be left in camp. One's mind, I thought, would have to be given some form of food. My choice was not original. I took two plays of Shakespeare's, *Wuthering Heights*, and two of Charlotte Brontë's novels.

We left Calcutta on a breathless afternoon in June, travelling to Rawal Pindi, and then by car to Srinagar. Most people who read travel books know about Srinagar—the Venice of the East and so forth. It is all true. The place is beautiful and haunting. You see forget-me-not coloured mountains in the distance; the colours of the bazaar overhanging the river are exquisite, and there are times when you feel you would be happy to stay there all your life. Lotus-eating. That is all life in Srinagar amounts to.

We remained for four days while we collected our kit, plus a shikari (the hunter who would know where heads were to be acquired) and a "chota shikari" or general help and washer-up of such dishes as there would be.

While there, we saw grass widows, real widows, distressed gentlefolk, Americans, young girls out to captivate, and little subalterns in immense plus-fours, the type that prefers to do its "shikar" (which, of course, means "hunting") among civilized surroundings. I don't want to suggest that there were many such. That would be unfair to the British Army. There were, too, old colonels and their wives who had become so much attached to "Mother India" that they could not bear to leave her even on retirement, and then there were a few people who had come only to steep themselves in lovely Nature, and who lived sometimes in tents.

During the season, from eleven to one every morning, the beauty, dowdi-

ness and fashion of Srinagar can be seen walking beside the Jhelum on the "Bund", or sipping a pre-lunch cocktail beneath the large and shady tree on the club "Pier". It is all very smart, very dashing, or incredibly boring, just according to the way one looks at it. In the mornings, too, dressy ladies do their shopping, buying Kashmiri furs from avaricious merchants, or tittuping along contentedly with parcels containing home-made dresses which the Srinagar "dirzies" are to embroider just like Mrs. So-and-so's. Sometimes one sees the lone man from the plains, impatient to get going on the road towards real shikar. He is hurrying about, as Noel was, followed by his shikari, buying stores, yakdans (a type of suitcase) to put them in, fitting his servants out with footwear, and endeavouring to leave Srinagar as soon as possible, so as to reach his shooting-ground quickly (each man when he gets his permit to shoot has his ground allotted to him) and not waste one moment of his precious leave. He looks with scorn upon the smartly plus-foured subaltern, and with but faint interest at the pretty women, feeling no doubt that there are times for all things.

After lunch the bund is deserted, while the population goes to sleep, then, at about 4 p.m., out it comes again in picnic parties, floating by in the flat-bottomed, attractively cushioned punts that are called "shikaras". Placidly these drift down the Jhelum river, and out by way of tributaries to the lovely spots that exist beyond. Slipping through narrow, leafy water lanes, they force their way through the lilies growing in such profusion, out on to the lakes that are without a ripple, where the pink lotus lilies grow. There you can lie, soaking yourself with beauty, thinking your thoughts, wondering about life and love and death. The atmosphere is not conducive to originality.

Many people maintain that the country is spoilt by the Kashmiri. He certainly does his best to make one think so. He is ubiquitous. If you live in a houseboat, the moment you appear in the morning he is already there, sitting in his shikara filled with carved woodwork, papier-mâché objects, copper urns, brass elephants, or silk.

"Buy something, Ladysahib," he oils, smiling at you from an amazingly handsome face. "Very good things, Ladysahib !"

An infuriated, "Go away at once !" cuts no ice. He interprets it as meaning, "Show me what you have got," and immediately brings pressure to bear. "Very pretty things, I show you," he says, as if you are a spoilt creature who needs humouring. You leave him and go inside the houseboat to begin a breakfast egg, but there he is, at the window, oiling, whining, unmoved by any insult that is hurled at him.

It is said that there is good in all men. Very well. Let us admit that although the Kashmiri is dirty, loquacious, idle, a liar and a thief, knowing not the meaning of gratitude—he is also a natural craftsman, adorning his creations with few of the crudities of British India. He will not work if a woman is at hand to work for him, and he will sell his wife, sister and even mother to the highest bidder, but both he and his women are almost always beautiful physical specimens, and for that non-moralists can perhaps forgive them much. The women are particularly lovely, having bold, fine features, fair skins, raven hair and enormous pale green eyes. You see them punting

the "dungas", in which so many Kashmiris live, their loose garments flowing from their shoulders in a graceful line; their teeth gleaming as they exchange smiles and back-chat with the punters of the boats they pass.

The Kashmiri is a wonderful waterman. He will guide a shikara through narrow congested channels, leaving a fraction of space to avoid a collision. He may infuriate you, but always you will want to look at him. He is a rascal, but to some his charm is potent.

I paid a visit to a merchant called Ganymede, who produced papier-mâché designs that were in a totally different class from those of the river vendors. His house hung over the Jhelum among golden-brown slums. It was strange to realize that these slums, built by uneducated people for dirty and somewhat unpleasant men and women to live in, could result in so much beauty. But in Srinagar beauty seems to happen just by chance. Even the white cushions, embroidered with coarse red thread, on the seats of the shikara which carried me, compared favourably with the orange atrocities piped with black that are sold in England for use in garden chairs.

At Ganymede's house I was met by a tout who asked me to follow him. Leaving a flagged stone passage, we turned up a flight of stairs, and I found myself in a room almost filled with carved walnut furniture. Beyond, there was another room with a window thrown out above the Jhelum. On the floor sat Ganymede, cross-legged, packing bowls into a box. I asked if he would show me some of his work. He motioned to me to sit down on the window-seat, which was a veritable sun-trap. The sun poured in, lighting up the exquisite colours that abounded on his work which was on every table in the room. The place was silent and peaceful, perhaps because Ganymede, with his flowing beard and dignity, was not garrulous like his brother Kashmiris.

"Memsahib would like some tea, I think?" he asked after a moment. He was now sitting on the floor before me. "I have some very good China tea. Memsahib like?"

Yes. Memsahib would like very much. A tray was brought with thin, handle-less cups of China tea, fragrant and spicy.

"And now I show you beautiful things." Again taking a seat upon the floor, this Eastern artist slowly and reverently unwound tissue paper from the bowls he had been packing. There was, of course, much else in the room he could have shown me, but time and trouble seemed not to matter to him. "These things are specially beautiful," he said; "they go to the Paris Exhibition."

Here were no bowls covered with forget-me-nots and roses, so often seen in the drawing-rooms of Anglo-Indian households. There was nothing here that had made the journey from Birmingham, only to be taken back to England by credulous tourists. He showed me golden coloured bowls with flowers amazingly wrought in copper; bowls of the deepest and most subtle shade of blue with purple irises traced in a bold design round them. Some had smaller designs of almost every colourful bird, painted with such attention to the details of their plumage that the craftsmanship astonished.

"You like, Memsahib." It was a statement.

"Very much. You design them all?"

"Of course, Memsahib, and never, never do I make two alike."

"You must love your work."

"But of course, Memsahib." He did not discuss its intricacies with me. Why should he, when I should have understood but little of them? Perhaps some people would have called the copper flowers a stunt. It mattered little when the result was beautiful. The afternoon passed happily.

While I was discovering Srinagar, Noel had been busy. He had collected a shikari called Sultana Malik, and a chota shikari called Samandu. Sultana Malik had a good reputation among sportsmen as a shikari who would always bring his employer within firing distance of the game which he was stalking. He was a squat man with a fine Kashmiri head that was too large for his body. He had intelligent eyes that seldom smiled, and a dark beard. Although, like all Kashmiris, he was greedy for money, his job was his supreme interest. He talked, thought, and lived sport. And now the first complication had arisen, for he objected to Rahim. He would, he said, have much preferred us to take a cook of his own choosing. That we could well believe, when we considered the bargaining that would take place at the villages we passed, and the pickings Sultana Malik would be able to share with a Kashmiri cook. Any but a Kashmiri, he said, would undoubtedly go sick upon the road, and, after all, was he not responsible for the Sahib's good sport? It was hard upon his reputation if the trip were to be so jeopardized from the start. We repeated what he had said to Rahim, giving him a last chance to back out of the expedition. Rahim answered laconically that he had been to Kashmir before, even if he had never trekked, and that he knew the "Kashmiri Log" very well. Sultana Malik accepted his defeat with a bad grace and at once proceeded to increase his demands for the warm clothing with which it is the custom for those bent upon shikar to equip their servants. We knew, of course, that he would sell it in the bazaar on his return.

Samandu was a longer, thinner individual with a mild, gentle eye that was, so Noel discovered later, extraordinarily good at spotting game upon the hillside. From the first I liked him better than Sultana Malik, perhaps because he did not look upon me with evident disapproval. I suspected that in Sultana Malik's mind I was merely an unnecessary encumbrance, and that Rahim was not the only member of our party whom he considered would jeopardize the chances of good sport.

Noel engaged one other servant, a camp cooli, who was destined to carry water, and chop wood, bringing our followers so far up to four.

It was not until June 23rd that we were ready to start, owing to the vagaries of the motor lorry which was to transport us, our kit, tents, yakdans and servants as far as Ganderbal on the outskirts of Srinagar, where we would camp for a night to collect ponies for the first six stages of the journey. Our tents, hired in Srinagar, were put up in the compound of the Dak bungalow, and our impatience to be off became acute.

Before dark, another traveller arrived to camp in the compound. He was a sapper who had taken his leave early in the year, collected a bag that included two ovis ammon, and who was now on his way back to the plains. He seemed very happy, and over tea gave us all the news of the road. I noticed

that his face had little skin left on it, and in a weak moment wondered how my own would stand up to sun, wind and snow. But such doubts belonged to the past. I was in for it now.

We supped at seven, in the cool air, and were in bed by eight-thirty, ready for an early start. It seemed waste to leave the outside world so soon, for moonlight was flooding the valley of the River Sind, making the hills around us, with the fir trees climbing their slopes, so beautiful as to be for ever unforgettable.

We were called by Rahim at six the next morning, and breakfasted at six-thirty, so as to start the march while it was still cool. Our next halt would be Kangan.

I was shaken by the number of baggage-ponies we needed; twelve for our kit and stores. And yet we had worked out the amount necessary to take with us to the last ounce. Naturally the total would be lightened as we proceeded, but twelve ponies seemed a lot. We took another one, too, for me to ride, because Noel seemed to think it would be a pity if I became foot-sore and cross. Evidently he was still not entirely convinced that his trip would not be ruined. Time, I felt, alone would show.

The weather was delicious; not yet too hot. The misty atmosphere was remindful of the English country on a perfect summer's morning. On either side of our road were enormous bushes of wild roses, and the air was sweet with them. Around us rose snow-covered mountains. In the warm sunshine it was difficult to believe that snow could be so close.

Our path wound up the valley of the Sind. Here the valley was wide, and there was much cultivation. Noel told me that higher up, nearer its source, the river became a rushing torrent tearing down over enormous boulders. He added: "This only breaks you in gently for what is to come." As a subaltern he had spent a leave in Baltistan.

In the distance we could see two men coming towards us, and for the first time I began to understand the excitement of meeting someone on a lonely road; the charm of surprise encounters, and the significance of the few words one exchanges with people who are trekking like oneself. When we came up with them we found they were two young subalterns who had been a long way and shot nothing; moreover, the pony of one of them had just upset "master" while crossing a tributary of the Sind. "Master" was so disgusted with it that he asked us to take it with us, back to the village where it belonged.

We arrived at Kangan, a tiny village, at 10.30, spread ourselves out beside the river under a big tree, and had our lunch. While our tents were being put up I cooled my feet in the icy snow water, thinking: I must try not to keep on saying, "This is heaven." It must sound monotonous.

And yet—the great bushes of roses made the place a garden. Green fields of barley ran down to the left bank of the river which was leaping and dancing down the valley in the sunlight, its water the colour of jade, flecked with white foam. Upon the other bank were wooded hills, reaching to a misty blue sky. I began to wonder what exactly was the peculiar atmosphere of Kashmir, which was somehow so remindful of loveliness at home, and yet so different. There was something of the feeling of Southern

Ireland in the air, much of England in the fields, and we were at a height of 6,000 feet.

Kangan boasted a post-office. I thought I would buy some post-cards and investigate its machinery. I found a tiny room, furnished only with a table used for office work, and a "charpoy" on which the posmaster was lying sound asleep. It seemed unkind to wake him for the post-cards. I said so to Noel, who had followed me in. Our voices roused the postmaster, who stretched himself, reached out a hand for his pugaree, and then sat up and rubbed his eyes like a child, the dignity of office returning to him with every second.

"Change it to a postal order," said Noel, "and see what happens."

"I want a postal order for five rupees, please," I said.

Something like a groan passed the lips of the postmaster, who appeared not yet capable of speech. This sounded like serious work with pen and ink. Letters were not so difficult. He could sell stamps, but this demand would take consideration and much time. Yet he appeared to be cheering up. I wondered why. Then he said delightedly, "No postal orders for India. Only postal orders for England," suggesting by his tone that this ought to defeat me. "I give you money order? Or if you like you can put five rupees in registered envelope."

"All right, I'll do that."

A drawer in the table was opened.

"You want a small envelope or big one?"

"Small one, please."

"I have no small one. You better take big one."

I began to feel a little tired of the conversation. "How much?"

"Four annas. You write name and address here, and here. . . ." He produced two receipts to be filled in. When filled, he put on his glasses and inspected them for a minute, as though they were something rare and curious, before he put them in a drawer.

Noel had given up and gone outside. I heard him calling me.

"Coming!" I answered. But the postmaster was not to be left so easily. He was now fully awake. He had just completed some work with the most admirable thoroughness. Now he expected something as a reward, and that something was "khubber".* Next to money and food, khubber is the thing most dear to the heart of the Kashmiri, and particularly those in the less-frequented parts of the country. Stop any cooli on the road, and he will tell you how many sahibs are on the "rasta",† which sahib has been shooting, and which merely trekked "dekna kewaste",‡ which sahib is American, and therefore rich, and the correct days for the arrival at the different stages of them all.

"Memsahib come from Srinagar?" asked the postmaster.

"Yes."

"Going far, Memsahib?"

"To Leh."

"Leh-Ladakh.... Ah—'lumba rasta'§ from Calcutta to Leh-Ladakh...."

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* News. † Way. ‡ In order to see. § Long way.

"Calcutta—how did you know that?"

"A gentleman—he go by Baltistan—he in Srinagar just now. His servant tell me." Further questions followed, until I determinedly left the office. I rather thought I had left the postmaster fresher than when I found him, while I myself was suffering from a feeling of exhaustion.

"Honestly, old girl——" Noel began.

"Well, you wouldn't have done any better. That man is undefeatable."

"You should have known it and been stronger-minded. He is an Indian postmaster. He is now utterly happy because he has made you write your name at least once more than you need have done. He has kept you twenty minutes in that post-office while he found out who you were, why you were here, and where you were going. He has dealt with you with firmness. What more has life to offer him as a compensation for being woken up in the middle of his working hours?"

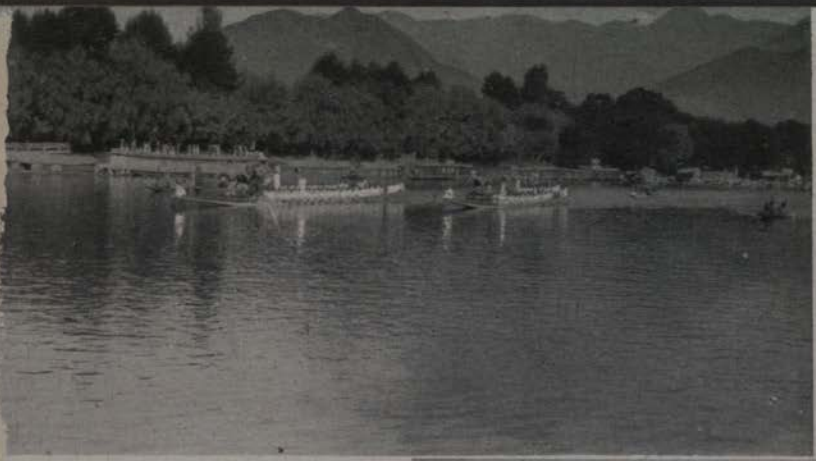
As we looked back, we saw a group of villagers already collected before the steps leading up to the post-office. The postmaster stood at the top of them. He appeared to be making a speech. No one should ever marvel at the way news travels in the East.

CHAPTER TWO

THE NIGHT WE SPENT AT KANGAN WAS COLD. NEITHER OF US GOT MUCH sleep, as the day before had been deceptive, and we had not unpacked enough blankets. That night the river, as seen from our tent, seemed to be bathed in liquid gold from the light of the moon. All round us was a beauty so unearthly that it made one catch one's breath in sheer astonishment. I had read much about the Sind Valley, but never had I expected anything like this.

I awoke at sunrise, and watched through the tent flaps the first faint pink rays touch the peaks high above the valley. The sound of water streaming from the mountains was entrancing music. Smells—what heavenly smells there were beside this river in the early morning! The air itself was a fragrant, heady draught, bearing a whiff of honeysuckle on it. The whole world glistened as the sun rose higher. A bird sang to us as we ate our breakfast beside the river bank. Toast, and mango? No, something less sophisticated but more fortifying than that. Porridge and scrambled eggs; Rahim's soda bread covered thickly with local butter. Bread that was "short" and crusty. Rahim knew how to make it.

Then the start. Yakdans and tents being packed, ponies loaded. A march of thirteen miles beside the tumbling river brought with it a feeling of conscious happiness and well being; a sense of freedom from all the troubled fussiness that can belong to life. We camped at Gund, and here we discovered, while sitting after our evening meal, that Sultana Malik, if given his head, was a non-stop talker. More, he had reached his "anecdotage" at a comparatively early age. He told us of an American who had spent three months shooting in Ladakh, and who had afterwards given his shikari 800 rupees as backsheesh. *That* was a Sahib indeed! insinuated Sultana Mailk. Another American, so he said, had fallen into the river at Dras—



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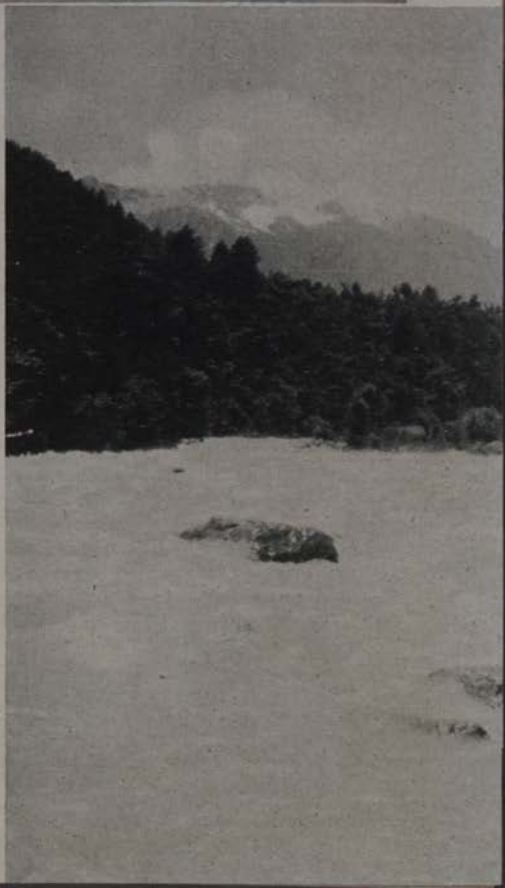
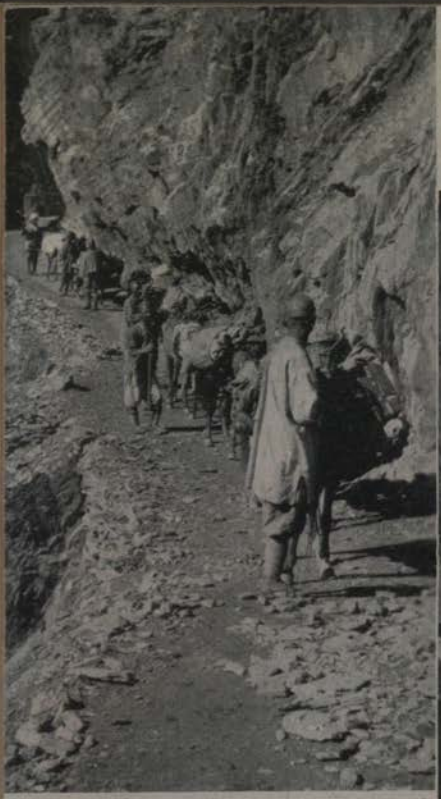


THE RIVER SIND



SOUTH SIDE OF ZOGI PASS

AUTHOR WITH SAMANDU AND COOLI,
SOUTH SIDE PASS

"AT LAST
WERE UI
THE PAS

a stage much farther on—and had never been heard of again. In view of his first story, Sultana Malik evidently thought this a pity.

All this talk of "pice"* was working up to his presenting his account for incidental expenses and the coolis' rations. It proved an interesting document. One item upon it was five rupees for rope for packing purposes. Noel asked to see the rope. A thin piece, perhaps three yards long, was produced. Noel held it up before the audience of coolis admiringly, remarking that although in good condition it seemed rather short for the price. The coolis laughed delightedly, and Sultana Malik's expression grew sour. The next item that came up for discussion was the saucepans used for cooking the coolis' food. These were charged for at five rupees each, but proved on inspection to be old and leaky. There was more laughter. While we were having supper, a dignified Sultana Malik appeared and remarked that he would be grateful if the Sahib would inspect his baggage which was now being packed, in order to see that he had stolen nothing, as he wished to return to Srinagar that night. Noel said, "Go away, I am eating," and Sultana Malik withdrew. It would, we knew, be inconvenient to be left without a shikari, although a local man could have been taken on at Leh. All the same, in his own department Sultana Malik's reputation for finding game was good. A night's sleep evidently cooled his temper, for when I left the tent in the morning I saw him packing yakdans. By the evening he was smiling and ready for more chat. He told us of a Sahib who drank 400 rupees' worth of whisky in a month, and who would not march more than five miles a day, adding, "Some Sahibs want shikar without trouble, but there is no shikar without trouble." Evidently Sultana Malik looked upon shikar as a life-work.

All this talk came at the end of a long day's march, most of which had been beside a deep gorge, with the Sind rushing beneath. The scenery was becoming wilder. We camped at Sonamarg on a grassy slope. This beauty spot is the farthest point to which those travellers come who want to explore only the lovely valley of the Sind. When we arrived the sun was blazing, but by evening a bitter wind blew, and the servants' tent collapsed. This time we unpacked plenty of blankets. In a few moments lovely Sonamarg had become a bleak, desolate spot.

The tent flapped as if it must soon be blown from its hooks. We tied up the flies as securely as we could, but nothing kept out the wind.

"A bath this evening? No, thank you," I answered Samandu, who was bellowing questions at me as to whether this luxury was required.

Perhaps I should explain how one takes a bath in such a camp as ours. In the tents we took with us there was a small space partitioned off at the back, and here a collapsible canvas basin, with sides perhaps eight inches high, was laid. Our bath water was heated over wood, in the black kerosene oil-can in which it is carried, as is the case in any up-country station in India. When the rays of a strong sun are penetrating the tent, this is a fairly pleasurable way of washing, but when a gale is blowing icy air upon one's wet body it is another matter. It was much later on our trip that I asked Noel, "How

* Money.

long was it before soldiers got lice in the last war?"—his answer, "Sometimes a week," sent me hurriedly to my canvas tub.

We pulled on Gilgit boots and many woollies. Samandu and the camp cooli began vigorously to dig a trench round our tent, and the point of this was obvious when, ten minutes later, the rain came down in torrents. We could look forward to a night upon the mountain slope at 9,000 feet, with a wind and rain-storm raging. "The party is indeed beginning," I thought. A tent in a windy spot is about as comfortless a place of shelter as can be imagined. The trench overflowed, and the water trickled in upon us. Our clothes and bedding were soon wet.

When supper came, the soup was cold, and Rahim's roast mutton had congealed. Bed and a hot-water bottle directly afterwards brought the day to an end, and, oddly enough, we fell asleep at once.

By morning the air was soft and sweet, and the hills around us looked friendly instead of relentless in the sunlight.

"We can start a bit later, if you like," said Noel. "We've only nine miles to do to reach Baltal."

Baltal is the last stage before the impressive Zogi La, the only pass for miles across the Himalayas into Ladakh; the pass that leads to Lamaland, and the exciting world of Central Asia, over which runs the track that is the main trade route from Yarkand, Kashgar and Tashkend into British India.

The Zogi lies at 11,500 feet, and has a bad name, chiefly owing to the danger of crossing it during the months when it is snowbound, for then, when the sun is up, avalanches may fall at any moment. At those times, too, the crossing is hard work, as steps must be cut in the ice and snow filling the ravine.

In summer the crossing is another story. Then the climb to the summit of the pass is no more than a lovely morning's walk. Even in June a good deal of snow may still be expected near the top. It is therefore advisable to make an early start before this begins to melt from the heat of the sun.

At Baltal, Noel insisted upon our using the small and dirty rest-house, so that there would not be much packing to be done the next morning.

To me, the rest-house, though solid, compared unfavourably with our tent. I thought still less of it when several cockroaches appeared from under the charpoys on which we presumably would sleep. The place was in charge of a Kashmiri chowkidar, and was utterly filthy. The state of the bathroom indicated that we should spend another night more or less unwashed.

Noel caught a bleak look in my eye. "Now, now," he said; "the greatest women travellers don't mind dirt, but I will allow you to sleep on your own camp-bed, because I've seen a bug or two in those wooden charpoys."

"I dare say in time I shall get better at it," I answered hopefully.

Rahim had lit a fire, and we drew up roorkee chairs towards it. He appeared now, and asked, "Memsahib, what for breakfast?" He had already proved his worth upon this trip. It was he who collected quite wholesome-smelling butter from the villagers on the route; who made a fire in the centre of three large stones over which he cooked; who dealt with greedy ponymen, bought a sheep for five rupees when eight were asked, and produced a satisfying meal after a long march. He had his idiosyncrasies;

without cigarettes he was like a motor without gas, and he refused to part from his large black umbrella. When walking, it became a stick, and now that the track was stiffer, and Noel had got him a "tat" to ride, he held it over his head while on the pony, as a protection against either sun or rain.

"Well, what?" I answered.

"Porridge, and 'rumble-tumble' eggs," he said, as one who made a new suggestion. "And what time chotahazri?"

"Five," said Noel promptly.

I protested, but Noel was unmoved. "Have you ever seen people trying to get along in deep, melting snow?" he asked. "Now go to bed like a good one." Like a good one I went.

We were greeted with the promise of a perfect day when we left the rest-house the next morning to move off at six o'clock. The air was cold, but we soon warmed up on the steep ascent up to the pass. Looking back along the valley towards Sonamarg, we saw the tops of snow-covered mountains emerging from a faintly blue mist, while around us were exquisite, opal-coloured peaks that the sun already warmed. The world seemed an unearthly kingdom.

The path up to the Zogi is about five miles long, and cut out of the side of a steep cliff. A rugged wall of rock rose to our left, while below us on the other side a deep precipice hung over the rushing stream. The track is on an average about six feet wide, and the only difficulties were one or two narrower places over ice and frozen snow, where a false step would have meant a fall to the rocks below. Having negotiated one of these places, we waited to see how the ponies would get over them, and whether or not they would have to be unloaded, but one cooli held a pony's head, and another his tail, and so they were man-handled across. A minor incident was the fowl that was to be slain later for our supper, escaping and taking a walk over the edge of the track, and causing perplexity on the faces of the coolis as to who should pursue it. At last it thought better of the adventure, returned to the narrow path, and to spend the rest of the journey in Rahim's arms.

I tried riding, but soon gave it up, not liking the look of a precipice from a pony's back. About half-way to the summit the sun reached us, and the snow on the surrounding mountains began to dazzle our eyes. The air became more delicious as we climbed higher. The effect upon our spirits is difficult to describe, but I could happily have stayed for days in that incredible fairyland. The track wound in and out. Always it seemed that we must reach the top around the next bend, and always, as we turned it, the summit seemed farther away than ever. Down in the valley the colour contrasts were amazing. The dark and valiant-looking fir trees climbed the hills like a mysterious army marching to the sublime; next came the silver birches, twisting in their fantastic shapes, and above them lay snow, the sun lighting all to a shimmering beauty.

At last we were upon the pass, which is perhaps a hundred yards wide and a mile in length. Snow had lodged in the gullies, forming bridges, beneath which streams forced a passage to the river below. Beside its banks we could see the carcases of two dead baggage ponies, the sad relics, perhaps,

of a trader's caravan. We walked happily up the wide snow carpet, using our khud sticks to keep our feet. Out of the stillness came the cuckoo's note with its promise of the late Ladakhi summer to come. In contrast was the shrill scream of the marmot sitting over his burrow, alarmed by the approach of our invading caravan. The only other sounds were the trickling of the many streams, and the voices of our ponymen, carrying far across the snow. Apart from this, there was the dead stillness of an all-pervading silence.

Soon we moved downhill again. Now the streams ran with us instead of against us. The snow bridges became more difficult to negotiate as the sun rose higher, causing them to soften. We were in Ladakh.

"There are two places where we can camp," said Noel. "Either Michahoi, only a few miles farther on, or Mattayan. Personally, I'd like to go on there."

We decided to do our fifteen miles, and reach the farther stage. By the time we arrived there a storm had risen, and hail beat in our faces. The valley looked a picture of desolation, grim and dark.

"Well, which is it to be," asked Noel—"tents, or another dirty rest-house?"

I was learning. You saved your servants as much as you could on a trip like this, because you knew what rigours they would have to endure later on. It wasn't fair to ask them to pitch tents in such a storm. "The rest-house," I said.

It was a lucky thing for us that we were the only travellers wanting shelter that night, for although the hut possessed two rooms, only one had a roof over it. A storm must at some time have dealt hardly with the little house, for part of its roof had been torn off by the wind. The hut was even dirtier than the one at Baltal, but an obliging and cheerful Ladakhi chowkidar was in charge of it. He was the first Ladakhi we had seen. He wore a coarse, oatmeal coloured garment, fashioned after the style of a kimono, with a cummerbund round his waist. He lit a fire, and helped to dry our clothes while we waited for Rahim to bring tea. A pigtail hung down his back and his three-cornered hat, made of black lambs' wool, was worn with an air of rakish abandon contrasting comically with his lined face and toothless mouth.

In each rest-house on the way to Leh we found a miscellaneous collection of books left by travellers over the past fifty years. There was interest to be derived from fingering and opening these volumes, each in its way proclaiming something of the mind and character of the person who had once owned it. Mostly the books were old novels, of a type almost forgotten at home. During the whole trek I came upon three volumes written by John Buchan, and once I found a copy of *Villette*.

The next day we realized that the easiest part of the trek was behind us. The country was changing. Trees were no longer to be seen, except at the few villages we passed, where the inhabitants occupied themselves with artificial irrigation and grew them for fuel.

We had entered a new country. Before us lay a wilderness of bleak, desolate hillsides and rocky wastes. It seemed incredible the way the

barrier of the main range of mountains stopped the clouds brought up from India by the monsoon, and the suddenness with which we found ourselves in true Tibetan scenery, with steep precipices and pinnacles.

A mountain just beyond the huts of Mattayan is known to the natives as being the stronghold of "Seva", the guardian spirit of Baltistan, the province of Kashmir lying to the west of Ladakh.

We left Mattayan at 6.30 in the morning, and it was bitterly cold, for the sun was not yet warming the valley. As soon as we turned the first bend, we began to feel its heat, and peeled off coats and woolies. We arrived at our next halting-place, Dras, at one o'clock, and found a wooded enclosure, known as a "bagh", where we camped and were at last able to have much-needed baths. Tea tasted good with Rahim's soda bread. After it we saw a Ladakhi approaching us. In Hindustani he asked us if we would like to see some polo.

Polo! It seemed an odd suggestion that polo should be played in such a place as this. It was the first sign that we were in what we afterwards found to be an Alice-in-Wonderland, upside-down world. I thought of dusty Indian maidans, of men sweating and cursing as they galloped and rode each other off, of pretty women watching, and the fearful seriousness of it all.

"Where do you play?" I asked.

"We have a very good polo ground. It lies just behind the Sahib-log's tent."

We now saw that an expanse of grass had been entirely enclosed by a stone wall, on which villagers were now taking up their positions as spectators.

"What time is the game?" Noel asked.

"It begins now. Please come with me."

We followed him to the ground where the game of princes would be played.

"Polo actually originated in Ladakh," said Noel, "and play here, according to the old rules, has never changed."

"I wonder what ponies they play on?"

"Probably those that we are going to hire to carry our kit tomorrow."

It seemed a utilitarian, though strange, idea.

We took our seats upon the wall. Several men on tiny tats were cantering about the ground, one riding a nice little skewbald.

"Who is that?" I asked our guide.

"That man is the Zildar, the headman of the village, and that man"—pointing to an odd-looking individual wearing a suit of checked yellow-and-black plus fours and a three-cornered fur hat—"is the Ranger." Our new acquaintance explained that "Ranger" stood for the local forest officer. As the Ranger passed us, he stoppd and seemed to want to talk. I asked him if he played much polo.

"No, I am only a beginner, but there are many good players here," he answered in quite fluent English. He told us he was a Christian, having been educated at a mission school in Srinagar. "The game now starts, I go and play," he said, and galloped away on his pony.

In Ladakh the polo side is not limited to four players. Newcomers continually gallop on to the ground, apparently joining whichever side they

like. The players carried short sticks shaped like a hockey-stick (their ponies are tiny) with which they appeared to hit the ball with great accuracy. The game began by a man galloping down the ground, throwing the ball into the air, and hitting it. Then all the players galloped towards it. This odd game was helped on by a trio of musical instruments : a native flute, a strange kind of guitar, and a drum. Whenever a goal was scored this band played a few notes of somewhat doleful-sounding music; but in Ladakh it is not enough for a ball merely to be hit between the posts for a goal to be scored, one of the scorer's side must dismount quickly and risk life and limb among the mob to pick it up, while all those on the opposite side hurl themselves upon him to try and stop his doing so. Sometimes while such a battle was in progress, the riderless pony took advantage of the occasion to run away, and when the struggle had been fought to an exhausted finish, the pony's owner would leave the ground to pursue his mount amid screams of exhortation and laughter from the spectators. The pursuit of the pony might last any length of time, but no help was given to the scorer of the goal. The other players dismounted and took a rest while he tore about the surrounding countryside. Not until his return with his pony was the game resumed.

. . . . .

On the east side of the Zogi one is suddenly aware of the lack of trees and the foliage of Kashmir, but it is not until one is beyond Dras that the air is filled with the strange, sweet, minty scent belonging to Ladakh. It is something hard to describe. A mixture perhaps of the hundreds of varieties of rock plants tucked in among the boulders; the smell of yellow roses that seem to be a feature of the country, and which somehow thrive in a part of the world where the rainfall is only two inches a year, together with the dryness of the dust beneath one's feet.

We left Dras at the usual hour of 6.30, arriving at the next stage at midday. Here the rest-house was in good repair, and we were glad to take shelter in it, for we were treated to the usual afternoon storm. I began to doubt the accuracy of the guide-book, which insisted upon an average yearly rainfall of two inches; but then, we were travelling through the "rainy" season, and also, we had not as yet penetrated far into the country. Here the scenery was bleak and rugged, and we began to feel far away from ordinary civilization. This was, as we were to discover later, only due to our inexperience of what being away from civilization really meant.

At Dras we exchanged ponies, sending those with which we had travelled back to their native village, and collecting others for the next few stages.

The trek was becoming harder work. Our next day's march would be one of twenty-one miles to Kharbu, lying at 9,000 feet. The path led downhill most of the way, and on either side of it grew luxuriant bushes of the yellow roses. We passed one or two small stretches of cultivation, but by the end of the march we were between high boulders, and the sun was blazing down upon us.

The gorge was so narrow that in one place it looked as though we could have jumped across the chasm through which the river rushed. The rocks here were smoothly polished, and of a deep brown colour. We found that

their surface coat could be easily scraped away, and that travellers had sometimes scratched upon them rough figures of animals and symbolic signs.

Conversation between us became impossible. Noel walked, and was always half a mile ahead of my pony, which stumbled over stones and boulders. My own energies were bent on arriving at the next stage, and trying to forget about an aching back and shoulders on which the sun blazed. We met no other travellers, and from the visitors' book in the rest-house at Kharbu, which all users of the hut must sign, it seemed there were few in this part of the country.

We reached Khargil, a larger and more important stage, where the roads divided for Leh and Baltistan, upon a baking and windless afternoon, after having marched fifteen miles through an apparently never-ending gorge entirely deficient of shade. Here there was a post-office, and we found letters awaiting us.

On we went, roses beside us, and the scenery always changing. We followed the bend of the Dras river, and were thankful not to be so enclosed as on the previous day. Apart from the roses, which grew only beside the river, the country was utterly barren. Magpies, which had suddenly appeared, seemed singularly out of place with their black-and-white Parisian *chic*. Boulders and rocks radiated the warmth of the sun, and the heat was intense. We found an oasis for lunch, close to a small village where Ladakhi women were working in the fields. It took some time to induce them to be photographed. They would advance shyly towards us, but as Noel approached close enough to focus them, they turned and fled. When this performance became monotonous, I took over the camera and was more successful. Later, while I was resting and running a comb through my short hair, they showed great interest, and one advanced to display her pigtails with pride, showing evident pity for my shorn state.

The sun was never covered by cloud during the twenty-three miles of the march to Maulbeck Chamba, and we cursed its insistence. My hands were burning and hurting horribly. Washing had become an agony. Although I wore a veil over my face, I had only fur-lined gloves with me, and these, in such heat, I could not bear.

On arriving at Maulbeck Chamba, we found the rest-house already occupied by two spinster missionary ladies, and the wife of the Moravian missionary at Khalsi. She was taking her little girl of ten to Srinagar, from whence she would travel to England and school in charge of the women missionaries. The child's mother told me that she and her husband had lived in Ladakh for nearly twelve years without a break. She begged us to be sure to visit her husband as we passed through Khalsi. "He suffers from loneliness even more than I do," she said.

In spite of at times acute fatigue, I was realizing that this trek was giving me more enjoyment than I had ever before experienced. Yet—each day, after about fifteen miles, my whole body ached, and I didn't know whether to walk or ride. If I dismounted, the road at once seemed to take a turn up hill, and the sun's rays on my back made climbing terribly hard work. When I took again to my pony, the poor beast crawled along with its head nearly touching the ground, which seemed appalling cruelty. Then my back would

begin to ache, and even a "numnah"* saddle felt like iron. I got cramp in all my limbs from the slow pace of the pony irritating me so much that relaxation seemed impossible. A leg thrown over, to sit as though in a side-saddle, made the pony stop hopefully to be relieved of his burden. Yet—perhaps just as the march was becoming unbearable—the camping ground would be seen in the distance—a patch of green and a few trees, and there was a tonic effect in the sight of it.

On arrival at such resting-places we both knew that real contentment belonging to the feeling that something was being achieved. Another march lay behind us. As I followed our journey upon the large-scale map which Noel insisted upon spreading upon my camp-bed, I felt we were indeed on the road towards strange adventure. We were already in a country that might have belonged to another planet, so different was it from the world we knew.

"No—you can't go to bed yet," he would say. "Don't you know that a map spread open is a sacred thing which mustn't be disturbed?" I was beginning to understand something of this. The road—if we followed it until its end, to what far countries could it lead us? To Yarkand, Kashgar, Tashkend—Russia. . . . And—we were only going as far as the Tibetan frontier in Chang Chenmo. Now it seemed but a little way. A map has since become to me a never-failing stimulant, yet one, in these days of imprisonment upon an island, which must be resisted if I am not to know an over-whelming urge to take to the road again.

I was beginning to realize that these first stages of our journey—the 260 miles to Leh, the capital of this country—should produce no difficulties to people of normal endurance. For Noel, who would be faced with hard climbing at far greater altitudes in the pursuit of game, they were acting merely as an excellent "pipe opener" for what was to come later. These marches, surely, could serve to make one extraordinarily fit, always provided one did not rely too much upon a pony. My own tiredness, backache and blistering now showed themselves only too clearly to be the result of too-soft living. I decided that if I were not to be a useless passenger they must be conquered. It came to me then how much we in civilized countries miss from being so thickly padded with comfort against the realities of life as lived in far-off lands. Not that I don't like and appreciate comfort. I am only too ready to welcome it. Yet the state brings with it penalties, not the least of these being an utter inability to face life in the raw, and this must mean weakness. I was having to take a bigger pull at myself even than I had anticipated.

The next day's march began through the most barren scenery imaginable. Here no roses grew, and we marched between brown mountains. The snow-line in Ladakh in summer is as high as 18,000 feet, and we saw no snow to vary the monotony. As the sun rose, great heat prevailed without a breath of wind. I thought the moon, if one could visit it, might hold the same atmosphere of unearthly stillness.

After about three hours' marching, we were at 13,000 feet and upon the Namikha Pass. We were thankful that the height so far had had no apparent

* Blanket.

effect upon either of us. On the top of the pass we knew that quality of exhilaration which belongs, I think, only to life in a mountainous country. Rippling brown waves rolled away from us into the distance. We felt as though we might be standing on a huge map of mountains. The longing to see what lay behind the farthest hill was growing upon me with every step I took into this mysterious land that was teaching me a little of the meaning of a primitive existence. I began to realize that these cheerful Ladakhi people through whose villages we passed depended for their very life upon the few fields of grain making such a happy splash of colour against the arid bareness of the hills. I learnt, too, that the man who walks long distances as part of his daily life, does not move along with what is sometimes described as a swinging step, but trudges at a slow and steady pace.

Even in the wilds, humanity does not vary much in its essential characteristics. Women look at other women with the same appraising curiosity, and our ponymen, whose rags would scarcely hold together, obviously had an instinct for that self-adornment which civilization has so firmly crushed out of the male in Europe. These Ladakhis would pick roses, sticking them at a rakish angle into their three-cornered hats, where they struck an incongruous note above faces ingrained with dirt.

We were now in the land of "mani walls". These were long walls of prayer. The stones of which they are built are flat and of varying size. An average one might be eight inches in length. On each is carved the sentence, "Om Mani Padme Hum", the mystic formula of the Buddhist. Translations of the sentence seem to vary, the most usual being, "Oh ! The jewel in the heart of the Lotus !" The walls are about five feet high, and almost the same width. Sometimes they are as much as a quarter of a mile in length. A good Buddhist must add his stone to the pile as he passes if he is to acquire merit, and he must leave the wall upon his right hand. If he were to leave it upon his left, the inscriptions would read backwards, and bring to the acquirer of merit harm, rather than good. Because of this there is always a path on either side of the walls.

Mani walls always denote the approach to a village, so we began to look for them, knowing that soon after passing them there would be welcome shade. Now we saw too for the first time "chortens", the burying-places of Lamaism. They are strange, dome-shaped erections, with holes delved in the sides of them into which the ashes of the departed are laid. Some of these edifices are very elaborate and covered with symbolical figures. The chorten is considered to symbolize the five elements into which the body is dissolved at death : earth, water, fire, air and ether. Everywhere now there were signs of Buddhism, from old men in the villages swinging their prayer-wheels, to Lamas journeying on their ponies, ringing their bells as they rode.

Sometimes we passed men driving ponies laden with goods for sale or barter. Always in passing they asked us for matches, and I wished I had brought many boxes to give to those traders who depended upon flint and tinder for a flame.

Down again we went into the valley, to spend the night at a village named Bod Kharbu.

We were now only fifteen miles from Lamarayu, where we should see our

first Buddhist monastery. The start of the march towards it was a stiffish pull up to the Photu Pass. From there, far away in the distance, we could see the snow-covered mountains of the Karakorum range. The silence was so absolute that, parodoxically, it became almost sound. I have looked at this sentence several times and asked myself what I mean by it. I can only say that on the pass I seemed to hear the silence.

We rested by a pile of stones and yaks' heads that Ladakhis and Tibetans raise to Buddha in all high places. Into these piles were stuck sticks, bearing rags on which prayers were written. Of yaks we were to find out more later, when at greater altitudes our kit was carried on them. As I gazed over range upon range of mountains towards Asiatic Russia in one direction and Tibet in the other, I had a strange feeling of omniscience which no doubt was as unreasonable as it is indescribable.

Just below the pass we met a Ladakhi girl leading her pony and its foal. She wore the usual intriguing dress of Ladakhi women: a thick-waisted garment with a full, gathered skirt. Over her shoulders hung a sheepskin, and on her head was a fascinating head-dress—a black, tightly fitting fur cap, from the crown of which hung a long strip of red leather studded with turquoises and cornelians. This is called a "peyragh", and is handed down to a girl by her mother upon her marriage, acquiring more stones upon it with every generation. The whole savings of a family can be seen upon a girl's peyragh, for in Ladakh, where polyandry is practised, it is the women rather than the men who seem to be the important people. There are sound reasons for this custom of polyandry, or the taking of several husbands by a woman.

To begin with, in that hard country, where survival is difficult, more boy babies are born than girls. Why this should be so I cannot say, but no doubt scientists can give a reason for it. Employment is difficult to find in a land where there is no industry, and immigration is impossible, for the Ladakhi suffers from illness and dies if taken from his native mountains. A family of perhaps three sons may depend upon a field of grain and a few head of sheep for its subsistence, and as all three sons cannot earn a living independently, the eldest becomes the owner of the family estate and must support his brothers, all sharing the same wife. Therefore, although a Ladakhi woman may marry several husbands, they must belong to the same family. When marrying the eldest, she is legally married to them all, although children of the marriage are considered to belong only to the senior husband. At his death, if his wife is still alive, her finger is tied to a finger of the corpse with a piece of thread; it is then cut, and this constitutes divorce for her from his two brothers.

A curious fact about this system is that the eldest son of a family enters into his father's estate on coming of age, even though his parents are still living. They are allowed to keep only a small portion of it for themselves, which becomes his at their death. If there are more than three sons in a family, the others do not share the wife, but must go away and seek their fortunes. Polyandry seems a strange custom, but in Ladakh it undoubtedly works, for marital quarrels, jealousy and such troubles are said to be so rare as to be practically non-existent.

After the Photu Pass we plodded on in silence for the next five miles, listening to the reed-like tones produced by one of our ponymen from his native, hand-made flute. Down we went, the valley narrowing, until quite suddenly the track took a turn to the left up a steep hill, on the top of which stood the thrilling surprise of Lamarayu Monastery. Built upon the slope of the brown hills, brown itself, and sinister-looking, the mass of stone was remindful of the ogre's castle in a fairy-story illustrated by Rackham.

As we approached it we felt the strangeness of its atmosphere. The light was dying from the sky, and the monastery looked grim and forbidding, almost a little frightening. The village and its surroundings seemed to greet us with a sigh of melancholy.

That night we asked the chowkidar in charge of the rest-house whether it would be possible for us to visit the monastery in the morning. He told us that this could be arranged.

Ladakhis are said in the main to practise a debased form of Buddhism. Even so, Lamas in Ladakh are still all powerful, and one-sixth of the population enter the Church. Ladakh, too, in spite of its conquest by the Kashmir State many years ago, is still almost as theocratic a country as Tibet. The majority of the priests are Red Lamas, who alone are to be found in Ladakh, whereas the Yellow Lamas, more ascetic and much stricter than the Red, are the prevalent sect in Tibet proper. The few Red Lamas we had seen upon the road were dirty and ragged, with faces marked by depravity. We wondered what we should find at the monastery. From its weird appearance and the atmosphere prevailing around it, we felt we should see much that was fantastic.

The next morning we were up early and climbing the steep hill towards the sinister brown pile above us. The path wound between high boulders and had been hardly visible from the village. On reaching the top of the hill we were met by two Lamas wearing the gowns of their calling. Their faces were dreadful: twisted, gnarled, cunning and avaricious. We followed them into the monastery.

A service was in progress. Upon one side of a large hall sat men; upon the other, women and children. All were shrieking at the tops of their voices what we took to be their prayers. What they uttered seemed to have no meaning for them. Sometimes they would roar with laughter as the words came from their lips. Children were playing and rolling on the floor, still yelling prayers. As we entered, everyone turned and looked at us, and the noise of bellowed prayer became still louder.

It took us some time to become accustomed to what was literally a dim, religious light, and although our eyes competed with it after a while, our nostrils were not so accommodating in accustoming themselves to inhaling thick waves of the odour of joss-stick, combined with that of unwashed humanity. The place stank. The walls were covered with paintings of human figures, giving something of a cinematograph effect, for a man would be portrayed standing, then about to move, then walking. The same man was pictured perhaps seven or eight times, always in a different position.

We followed the Lamas into another hall given over to images—frightening, seemingly evil-minded images. Towering above them all was an

immense Buddha, larger far than life-size. We passed into another room where again the walls were covered with paintings. Here the pictures depicted violent scenes of humans struggling with monsters; vicious-looking monsters which wound their victims round with hundreds of arms and legs, in an attempt to drag them down to bestial infernos. Here the whole atmosphere was charged with evil.

Outside we were besieged by Lamas asking us for backsheesh. Having dealt with them, we walked down the rugged path from the monastery, and soon we were once again on the road to Leh.

CHAPTER THREE

WE ENTERED A NARROW GORGE, TO FOLLOW A STREAM UNTIL IT JOINED THE River Indus, which we crossed by a suspension bridge leading to an old deserted fort.

This fort is of a type usual in that country, and had been built down on the rocks beside the river. The glare and heat were devastating. After a mile or so we came to Khalsi, the home of the Moravian missionary. His little house lay in a well-wooded compound. He made us very welcome, gave us tea, lettuces grown by himself (which were a joy after being so long without fresh vegetables) and the best brown bread, made from rough country flour, that I have ever eaten. He was a small man with strange, light-filled eyes which seemed always to be gazing at something far away. He told us much of his life. It must have been desperately lonely, for he and his wife saw no Europeans during the seven snow-bound winter months. He made, so he said, few converts, for the reason that whenever he had hopes of a conversion to Christianity, the Lamas stepped in, drawing the would-be Christian back to Buddhism. Often he was away for as long as a month or six weeks, visiting remote villages in the mountains, trekking over rubble and rock, and at the end of a long journey having to find the inspiration to preach. During these times his wife was left alone.

He had four children. The eldest was born at Leh, and with the second child was now at school in England. At the birth of these children he had acted as both nurse and doctor. He admitted that the life had told on his wife and himself, that sometimes their longing for the society of Europeans was almost unbearable, and that he and she had become nervy and were increasingly afraid of abnormality. Then he showed us his dispensary, for Moravian missionaries, although unqualified, have studied medicine and have many patients from among the native populations of the countries where they teach. His church was a long room with a few chairs, a desk and a piano. In the dispensary he showed us a tube of serum which he used for leprosy cases, saying he was attending at the moment to fifteen lepers.

"Religion and medicine," he said. "The two are indissoluble." His youngest child, a fat-cheeked baby boy of a year old, was lying asleep in his cot, left by his mother in her husband's charge while she was on her journey to Srinagar with the little girl we had seen.

Around this priest hung an atmosphere of simplicity, devoid of self-

satisfaction. He and his wife had lived for twelve years in this wild, mostly snow-bound world, brought up children under hard conditions, seen little result of their labours, and sacrificed the companionship of their fellow Europeans. (Even that of the missionary in Leh was denied to them in winter.) They had suffered heat, cold, and perhaps even the physical hunger born of the utmost frugality, yet it was obvious that hope was still alive in their hearts.

On July 7th we set out on a dull march along the Indus Valley, our eyes seared by glare, our bodies aching from the heat of the sun. I felt I never wanted to see the Indus again, and envied Rahim his umbrella. There he sat, imperturbable upon his pony, his back erect as the umbrella he held aloft. He mistakenly thought little of the efficiency of Ladakhi coolis, and would sometimes prod them in the back with it to exhort them to greater effort. We found a good rest-house, which cheered us, at Sospul.

The next day an eleven-mile march brought us to a pass with a revivifying view, and away from the hated Indus. Walls of prayer were increasing in number, and the bareness of the country made us look forward more than ever to occasional little patches of green in the distance promising habitation and a moment's rest beneath a shady tree.

July 9th found us on our last march of eighteen miles before Leh, most of it through baking desert land. On turning thankfully away into a more shaded valley, we were met by a man cantering towards us, beating his "tat". He was an Indian servant who salaamed and said, "Memsahibs salaam dia !" Memsahibs, we wondered—where were other memsahibs? He led us to a sheltered spot in a tiny village where we found two Englishwomen, one in great pain. She and her companion had been travelling as tourists to Leh. While riding, she had, like Rahim, opened an umbrella against the sun, when her pony, frightened by the sudden arrival of a shadow in his path, had deposited her upon the extremely hard ground. Her friend sent a cooli in search of the Moravian missionary in Leh, who set out immediately. On arrival he diagnosed a fractured rib. As we arrived the poor lady was being borne away on a stretcher to the missionary's house to be further attended to by his wife. I felt more than a little sorry for her. At home in England she was apparently a hard-riding woman. To fall off a mountain pony is an inglorious accident to happen to a horsewoman. No wonder that her words on the subject were vehement.

Leh, though small, is an interesting town, and is the capital of the old province of Ladakh, as well as being the terminus of the various Central Asian trade routes which carry the merchandise of Turkestan and Tibet into that part of India lying adjacent to the Kashmir State. There, we should find the last of the rest-houses, together with a barber, a washerwoman and a store where a few tinned fruits could be bought. The British Joint Commissioner who, acting under the resident in Kashmir, visited the town for a few weeks every summer, and the missionary and his wife, were likely to be the only links with that civilization which, on quitting the town, we should leave behind until we returned from our ultimate destination.

The town was dominated by a palace built upon a hill overlooking it, which was once the residence of the Gyalpo, or the ruling race of bygone days,

Close to it stood the inevitable monastery. The palace stood upon a high spur, and sloped in a curious way, inwards from its foundations. The monastery was painted red and white, and decorated with many yaks' heads, together with rags bearing imprinted prayers, which floated in the breeze.

We were glad to pause for a couple of days, and made full use of our time in seeing those people who could help us with advice about our further journey. We explored the small bazaar, and the Yarkand and Lhasa Serais, where there were to be found an amazing collection of types representing many Central Asian peoples.

Here we were able to buy green vegetables, and, after days without them, they seemed the greatest luxury.

Among the local notabilities at Leh are the Wazir, or Kashmir governor, also the Tehsildar, without whose help no wood, potatoes, ponies or coolis could be obtained. Next in importance comes the postmaster, upon whose good offices we would depend for the despatch after us of our mail, for which we should have to send a cooli from time to time. On the non-official side there was a very charming Mohammedan called Bahr-ud-din-Khan, who was lord of the Yarkandi Serai, and through whose hands passed most if not all of the trade from Turkestan. While sipping his scented China tea out of elaborate cups made in Moscow, we heard all the gossip of the bazaars from Kashgar to Khotan. The other large Serai in Leh, to which came all the trade from the Tibetan side, was owned by the family of one Mustapha Sidik, who, with a collection of brothers and cousins, did good business in Tibetan and other Asiatic tea-urns, drinking-cups, carpets and a few skins. His house seemed to me to have an Arabian Night's atmosphere. It formed three sides of a square yard, into which were collected the loaded ponies of every caravan as it arrived. He and his relations received guests, together with customers, in a large room with an overhanging alcove and wide-open windows on the first floor, from which the courtyard could be seen. The roof and walls of this room were painted vividly with every imaginable colour, as is the custom in Tibetan houses, while on the floor there was a kaleidoscopic covering of carpets, mostly from Chigatse in Tibet, but here and there intermixed with equally colourful ones from Turkestan. Several travellers of different nationalities were there when we arrived, and one could imagine how, in this Serai, anyone blessed with the gift of tongues could hear much that was interesting of the political as well as the economic situation in Tibet and Turkestan.

It was quiet in the room. I began to feel I had been transplanted to a life that had existed many centuries ago, for here time seemed of little account, and the smallest action was performed with consummate dignity. Buying and selling was evidently a leisurely business, and one that must be made as pleasant as possible for both seller and buyer. Now I saw that the roof of the room was built of the barks of trees. There was no space on the floor uncovered by the carpets, while the divans round the walls were draped with them.

An old man welcomed us. He had a kind, seemingly perpetual smile. After offering us two chairs in the centre of the floor, he sat down cross-legged at our feet, smoking his hookah in silence. Upon the carpeted divans,

various individuals were lying, mostly without speaking. Opposite them were carved Kashmiri tables bearing hookahs and food. A tiny girl, referred to as the grand-daughter of the old man, danced round the room. She was dressed in a gauzy frock of rainbow colouring. These people seemed to understand the difficult art of keeping silent. They knew too—as was obvious from the forms upon the divans—how to relax.

"The Memsahib is very anxious to see your carpets," said Noel after a moment.

"Ah, my carpets! What I have are here. I have no new ones yet. Caravans not arrived. Winter very bad this year." The old man spoke broken English in a wheezing voice.

"I suppose no Yarkandi caravans have come either?"

"No, but coming soon. Kardong Pass now open."

There he sat, very still, almost like an image. Friendly, but not anxious for conversation. His old, intelligent eyes with the creases round them were half shut. What were his thoughts—he who mixed with travellers from the farthest ends of the earth? What was he meditating so deeply?

We bought some Chigatse carpets, leaving them to be fetched on our way back. There was peace in that room, where silence was more prevalent than conversation. Peace, and the feeling of an age-old wisdom.

That afternoon we paid a visit to the missionary's house to ask for the lady with the fractured rib. We found it had been set, and she was now on her way back to Srinagar on a stretcher born by coolis.

It seemed strange that even here an Englishman had been able to make his house so remindful of his country, for, passing through a wicket gate, we found ourselves in a real garden. At the top of some stone steps there was a rose-covered porch. The place might have been an old English country cottage. At the door we were greeted by the missionary's wife. She led us into the cottage which had lavender-washed walls. She too told us much of her life, and, as the next day was Sunday, invited us to come to the service in her husband's church.

It was odd to follow Matins read and sung in Tibetan. We noticed that the fifteen converts who, beside ourselves, made up the congregation, were the only clean Ladakhis we had ever seen. But then, as a people, Ladakhis are said not to wash. When a child is born, all its feminine relations meet to weave it a woollen robe. This is worn until the child grows out of it, when another is placed upon the top, the one beneath eventually tearing into rags. As life proceeds, other robes cover the old, so that the wearer walks about with the remnants of many garments on him. It was obvious that the people aged quickly. Most faces were deeply lined, especially about the eyes, probably from the effect of sun and snow. In the case of old people, the dirt of years had collected in these lines, and yet, with it all, a rare charm was evident. Everyone smiled at us in the street. Ladakhis laughed much, particularly the women. It was obvious that even with their dire poverty and their illiteracy they found life good. The Moravian missionary told us more of them. "They are far simpler than the Indian," he said. "They know instinctively the right from the wrong sort of people, and if you are the right, they will never give you any trouble. They are trustworthy. I'd

rather be with a Ladakhi in a sticky place on a mountain than with anyone I know. They will never let you down. If they lie, they lie through fear, like children. The Kashmiri takes every penny he can from them. They hate the Kashmiri."

. . . . . .

It is only nine o'clock, and we have finished our last supper in the rest-house. One by one silent figures come and go amongst the shadows thrown by the trees in the compound. Rahim is packing yakdans outside the cook-house door. The camp servants are enjoying a whispered gossip with cronies from the bazaar. From the Serai 100 yards away comes a low murmur of the traders' evening chatter, mixed with the squealing of refractory ponies and the melancholy note of the flute of some Ladakhi shepherd squatting in a ring with others like him, who have come to Leh to do some marketing, and who tomorrow will be away again on their road to their desolate homes amongst the snows. We sit on, conjuring up visions of the mighty passes that lie before us, of the deserted table-lands surrounded by frowning precipices that we must cross. I know that Noel is thinking of the wild sheep and antelope of this mysterious region in search of which he has come so far. We are sitting at over 11,000 feet above sea level, and so far feel none the worse; but in a few days we shall be nearer 20,000, and according to our friends suffering from many discomforts on that account. I am impatient to push on to the highest point, hoping that there I shall understand more of the reason for that urge which was driving me on, almost despite myself, to that far plateau beyond the mountains.

The proverb about procrastination being the thief of time is bound to come to mind in India and her adjacent countries. At 7 a.m. on the morning of our departure from Leh, tents, yakdans, saucepans—all were packed, but ponies were not forthcoming, even though these had been fervidly promised by the Tehsildar. Now he sent a message to say that he was sorry that all available ponies were away in different villages, but that he had sent a man to look for them, and doubtless they would arrive by the next morning.

Noel's face resembled nothing so much as a boot. He wrote a note. "You can give this raspberry to the Tehsildar with my love," he said to the servant who had brought the message.

"Raspberry, Sahib? I do not understand."

"That," said Noel, pointing to the note, "is a raspberry. Take it to the Tehsildar!"

The servant disappeared. An hour later the Tehsildar himself appeared on the scene. "But, sir, what can I do? The fault lies not at my door!"

"I'll tell you what you can do, Tehsildar Sahib," said Noel, while I listened admiringly, "you can send a man *now* to collect ponies. They are to be here by three o'clock this afternoon, as Memsahib and I leave for Ranbirpur today and not tomorrow, understand?"

"Sir," remarked the Tehsildar.

"Commissioner Sahib coming soon?" Noel went on. "I hope to see him on my way back. He is a great friend of mine!" (We had met him but once on a shoot in Central India.)

NORTH SIDE OF ZOGI

"ONE OR TWO NARROWER PLACES . . ."

LADAHKI WOMAN

CHILDREN

"Commissioner Sahib coming day after tomorrow, sir. Sir—to collect nies is an impossibility, but I will do my best," moaned the Tehsildar. uch was the power wielded by the name of the Commissioner. The ponies rived.

The first day's march with new ponies and redistributed loads is always a difficult one to get going, and this one was no exception. The morning's delay had, of course, meant a start much later than we had anticipated. The baggage ropes were rotten, and it was nearly four o'clock before our whole party was clear of the massive wooden gates which can shut off the entrance to Leh from the outside world. The road led straight down to the Indus Valley, over the same sandy, rock-strewn plain by which we had approached the town from the West.

Directly outside the city there is one of the largest and longest mani walls we had so far seen. At the northern end of it Noel took a snapshot of a newly built chorten, on which were being painted a collection of fearsome beasts, resembling furious-faced griffons, centaurs, and flying fish. The sun was still as hot as in the plains, and we were both thankful for our thick topees and glare glasses. Most people, when following this route in the months of June, July and August, prefer to march in the earliest hours of the morning, or even at night. Yet here we were, struggling along in the afternoon. We cursed the Tehsildar.

About five miles of this particularly bad going brought us again close to the River Indus. Turning sharply to the left, we came to a good stretch of grass cut up in every direction by small water courses. Here we passed two typical Lamaserais, or Gonpas, as they are called in Tibetan.

First at Tikse and then at Hungus are to be seen the flat roofs and innumerable tiny windows of these monasteries of the yellow Lamas. Built so as to fit into the highest sky-line of a carefully chosen mountain spur, their walls decorated with red paint, and their roofs with brass or copper spires, surmounted with yak tails and prayer flags, they gaze uncompromisingly eastward. Grim stories, truthful or not, are told of the deeds of their inhabitants. It was said that the Lamas fed the ignorant villagers on the most gruesome nonsense about devils and evil spirits, and that in return, under the influence of fear, they received from the villagers the best of the food produced from their land.

Our camping-ground that night was a compound shaded by trees, and occupied by a cow and her semi-blind owner, who was glad, for a few annas, to sweep clean a large patch of grass to accommodate our tents.

I was beginning to find it hard to remember the days of the week. My diary had been written under the headings of 1st, 2nd and 3rd days of the trek. I now decided to date it more carefully.

The guide-book gave the next march as fourteen miles. According to the map, this should have been eighteen. By the end of it we agreed with the map. We were, at the start, beside our old enemy the Indus, and suffered the usual blistering sun; punishment which seems inevitable anywhere near that river.

Soon, however, came blessed relief. The road turned to the left, leaving

the river bank and making for a low, sandy gap across the foot of the spur ahead of us. Crossing this, and swinging still more left-handed, we found the lovely shady willow groves and rose-decked paths of Kurru. Here we rested for a little while. Rich green crops and gleaming fields of mustard stretched far away from us up the nullah, and thankfully we turned our backs on the grumbling river and massive mountains which concealed the great Hemis Monastery lying about four miles away. The valley which we must now follow was that of the Chimre river, and we set off along its left bank, facing due north and gradually climbing the more gentle part of the approach to the Chang Pass, which we should have to cross in two days' time. After leaving Kurru, the road emerged again on to open, stony ground, which was almost as trying to the temper as the river valley we had left. Yet the air became fresher as we advanced. The valley opened out, and the scenery, with its strange blending of vivid, fertile fields, and barren, neutral-tinted rocks above them, became entrancing. Now and then we saw Chikor (the hill partridge of Northern India) covering the ground uphill on their red legs at an amazing speed.

About four miles after leaving Kurru, the sight of a large village raised false hopes that the end of the march was in sight. The ponymen were anxious to remain there for the night, and insisted that it was the correct stage, but Noel was determined to go on, so as to shorten the marching of the next two days, which would be very strenuous. Also, we would be able to get fresh ponies at Sakti, which place we hoped to reach that evening. On and on went the road, now over open ground again, and as we gradually climbed higher, we began to catch glimpses of the snow-capped mountains of the higher ranges standing farther back from the Indus. At last our stage appeared in sight, and we pressed on a little faster, although the baggage had fallen a good mile or so behind us. The camping-ground at Sakti was at about 13,000 feet, but still we felt no discomfort, perhaps because our ascent all the way from Srinagar had been so gradual that we were somewhat acclimatized. Here the natives of the village were particularly obliging. The headman, who occupied himself greatly with our wants, was an exceptionally cheerful individual. As soon as tea was over and the loads stacked on one side of the compound where we had pitched our tents, the Leh ponymen were paid off. On account of the steepness of the climbing of the next two marches, Noel gave orders for two extra riding-ponies for Samandu and Sultana Malik, who would have to work directly they arrived in camp. These ponies would stay with us until we arrived at Tankse, three marches farther on. He also arranged for a cooli to start that night with a load of wood, and to leave it for us at the next stage, Zingaru, as there would be nothing there of which to make a fire, the stage lying as it did upon the bare mountain-side.

Our camp was beside a stone bridge built over a stream. We were sitting peacefully that evening, listening to the always enchanting sound of running water, when Sultana Malik arrived to say, "A great Ladakhi Memsahib is in this village. She wishes to make salaams. She is the Memsahib of the Zildar of Leh-Ladakh, and is a very great Memsahib." Sultana Malik seemed excited as he stressed this point.

We saw an apparently old Ladakhi woman advancing towards us over the bridge. Probably her real age was between fifty and sixty. It was difficult to tell, but to European eyes she looked more than this. Her wide skirted dress was made of rich blue velvet, and many turquoise, coral and cornelian necklaces were hung round her throat. Her peyragh was large and gorgeous with embedded stones, and she wore several bracelets on her wrists. With quick, decisive little steps she came up to us.

"Juli, Juli!" she cried, in the high, sing-song voice of all Ladakhi women.

We replied, "Juli!" realizing that this must be the Ladakhi form of greeting. She seated herself in the roorkee chair that Noel offered her, and motioned to Sultana Malik to stand beside her, evidently intending to use him as an interpreter.

Sultana Malik now made his formal introduction, again insistent that we found ourselves honoured by the visit of a great lady. He was interrupted by a volley of words from our visitor, to which he listened intently. "She has come to salaam the English Ladysahib, because being such an important person she is well used to meeting Sahib-log," he said. More words followed from the old lady, who sat in her chair as though it were a throne. "She is the daughter of a Rajah of Leh," he went on.

"And where is she going to?" I asked, a little shaken by a pair of eyes, intensely alive in their wrinkled setting, regarding me unflinchingly, from my breeches and stockings to my shorn head.

"She is going to Shusol. She takes many sheep of the Zildar, her husband, to barter them there." The old lady was nodding vehemently, as though to emphasize his words.

"You are going to cross the Chang La?" I asked, addressing myself to her.

The answer was in the affirmative.

"Will the Memsahib not find the trek very tiring?" I asked Sultana Malik. When this question was translated to her the old lady seemed to find it a good joke, for she laughed loudly and long. Her laugh was a raucous cackle. I wondered if she could mean to travel all the way in such elegant clothes and jewelry.

Through Sultana Malik, our guest now addressed a number of remarks to me. "I have four children. How many have you?"

I told her.

"I have met English ladies before, but they have always worn skirts!" —with a disapproving eye upon my breeches.

"I do wear skirts when not trekking with my husband, Memsahib," I replied.

"And their hair was long."

"Mine is usually longer than this."

"Why, then, did you cut it?"

Looking at the long plaits looped round her head, I felt I could hardly answer, "For the sake of cleanliness." I was at a loss.

"You are still quite young. No doubt you will have many children." She smiled encouragingly at Noel.

We offered her tea, which she refused, taking her departure.

"Holds her head high, that old dame." said Noel.

I was thinking that the old lady, looking, as she evidently did, upon the crossing of the Chang La as an ordinary morning's ride, made my own apprehension as to the pass seem a little foolish.

As I was brushing my hair the next morning several of the cheerful villagers came to look at me. They whispered together and laughed. Was I a boy or a woman? They didn't appear to be sure. It became a little awkward. I was in pyjamas and I wanted to dress, yet it seemed rude to close the flaps of the tent, and if they found in me a cause for merriment, it seemed a pity to deprive them of it. One old village man told Samandu that he had never seen a white woman before, and that I was the second ever to have taken the road to Chang Chenmo. His father, he said, had remembered the first, who had been a well-known woman traveller at the end of the nineteenth century. I felt supremely flattered, and have hoped ever since that this was true. What the next day's march lacked in length (we only did nine miles) it certainly made up for in steepness and lack of interest. We zigzagged backwards and forwards up a narrow valley, and soon, leaving the last of the vivid field of crops behind us, climbed along a barren hillside to a small patch of grass, barely large enough for our tents, and entirely surrounded by enormous boulders. At this point the road ceased to be a path at all, and became the bed of a stream, and a very rough bed at that. We were, however, somewhat cheered by the sight of the cooli Noel had sent over-night sitting huddled over a fire which he had lit before our arrival. Sultana Malik said that the pass was two miles higher up, and that the road became considerably worse before we reached it. Knowing that he was always gloomy, I did not allow this information to trouble me. This was a recognized stage before crossing, so our tents were pitched, and we got into them as quickly as possible. A moment later, down came the clouds from above, then rain, and eventually hail—driven from all directions by the howling wind—beat fiercely upon our little camp. At that moment we turned into bed with hot cocoa to wait till morning; height 16,000 feet, and breathing just beginning to be difficult.

Just as we were settled in our tents, the old Ladakhi lady passed us on her way still farther up the mountain. Sitting erect upon her pony, sometimes beating it with a long rope, the folds of her blue velvet dress reaching nearly to the ground, she showed no signs of exhaustion. She looked like a queen at home in her kingdom.

"Where will she camp?" I asked Sultana Malik.

"She will not camp, Memsahib. She will sleep in the open." We now saw a servant following her. "Her servant carries a blanket," Sultana Malik went on. The old lady disappeared into cloud.

Zingaru. Names of places and people can be peculiarly descriptive. I could imagine none that would better fit the desolate spot where we must wait till morning.

That night was hell. If either of us dozed, it was only for a few minutes. We had to prop ourselves up in bed to take pressure off our lungs. I felt curiously above myself; swimming in the air above my body. It seemed I could only take little, short, gasping breaths. The struggle to breathe became

exhausting. And—we were only at 16,000 feet. The pass was 18,500. "Can I get over it?" I wondered. I knew I must.

By early morning the camp was enveloped in mist, and there was gloom upon the faces of the coolis. Rahim plodded about, his face grimmer than ever. I was beginning to be worried about him. Before we left Calcutta, Noel had given him a thick suit of plus fours to wear against the rigours of the climate. So far on the trip we had not seen it. Once I had said to him, "Rahim, where is the suit the Sahib gave you?" He had answered, "I keep it, Memsahib, until the weather is really cold, and then I wear it." Yet this morning, there he was, in his old tweed jacket, and voluminous white cotton Mohammedan trousers. What could be the reason for this? He was too occupied for me to ask him now. I knew he must be half frozen.

We didn't start until 9 a.m. Too late, for the wind had changed from the north-easterly gale that had blown all night and now came from the west. The servants looked still more gloomy as they observed this. A west wind meant possibly melting snow; and deep, melting snow meant hours spent upon a high pass in getting sunken, heavily laden pack-ponies to their feet again. The coolis knew this very well, although we hadn't thought of it. I say "we", but I believe Noel had. At any rate, he and the men were working with grim determination to get away. I, unsteady on my legs, frozen to my innermost soul, felt but a burden and a useless creature.

I started on a pony, wearing all the warm clothes I had beneath my blanket coat. The climb was steep and stony, and no one spoke. We none of us had any breath to spare for conversation, and we were climbing straight up the mountain-side. I saw that my pony's nose was bleeding, bred though he was to those heights, and that his sides went in and out like a concertina. I dismounted and let the ponyman lead him. All this time it was cloudy, and we could see nothing. At last we were on the summit of the pass, where it began to snow. We were thankful for our Burberrys on top of everything else. Here the first baggage-pony went into the soft snow up to his girths. With each step forward none of us knew how far in we were going to sink! Oddly enough, on the top of the pass, neither Noel nor I felt anything but exhilaration. Fifty yards brought us to a very gradual descent. It was here that mountain sickness caught us all. In spite of it the men were working at the ponies. No sooner was one got free of the snow than in would go another, the poor beast lying still, unable to help itself. Noel was behind me, helping the coolis, when suddenly the sickness got me. I thought my head must burst. My ears were drumming. All I wanted was to put my head upon the ground. I tried to take a pull at myself. "Go on—get farther down," I told myself. "Go on!" If I collapsed here, it would only be an extra burden to our already struggling caravan. My will was not strong enough. I fell upon the ground and lay flat. It was a blessed relief. That was all I wanted—to lie flat. I felt it didn't matter if I never moved again. I was unconscious of the cold, penetrating wetness of the melting snow, but was content to lie, making no effort. I closed my eyes, and could have slept.

"I carry Memsahib!" Rahim was standing over me in his thin clothes. His face was grey. "I carry Memsahib!"

I was not too far gone to know shame. I sat up. "No, thank you, Rahim." He gave me his hand, and together, falling into the snow with every step, and pausing to drag each other out, we staggered on. Where was Noel? I looked for him. He was still far behind me, helping with the baggage-ponies. Again my head had to go down. I stopped, and put it between my knees. It brought relief, but as I raised it the world was revolving about me. I was cold and hot. I knew there was sweat on my forehead, because I could feel the wind blowing upon it. There seemed a terrible expanse of snow to be covered, and all vestige of strength had left my limbs.

"Memsahib tik hai?"*

"Tik."

We went along with long strides, trying not to rest our feet too long in one place for fear of sinking. At last, perhaps 100 feet below us, I saw a patch of green. I tried to hurry, and fell. Again that dreadful lassitude came over me.

"Go on. Leave me alone, Rahim." I think I sounded cross.

"I carry Memsahib."

"Go away." His voice and mine sounded a long way off.

He took hold of my arm, and pulled me up. I held his hand again. More strides, gasping for breath; but this time I was saying to myself: "Mustn't stop again . . . must get down . . . must get down." Everything was going round. I held Rahim's hand more tightly, because I could hardly see him. We reached the green patch, where I lay down. Rahim fell upon the ground a few yards away from me.

Noel reached us three-quarters of an hour later. He, too, looked the worse for wear.

"Rotten going, wasn't it?" he said. "I knew you were all right with Rahim. Have a drink of this." He gave me some sal volatile. The blessed, miraculous kick of it! I felt practically well in a moment.

The passage across the summit of the pass had taken two hours, for each time a pony had sunk, it had meant unloading him, as he couldn't move until the weight had been taken off his back. Then the kit had to be carried by hand to firmer ground, where either the snow was shallower, or frozen more firmly, and where he could be reloaded.

We took half an hour's rest before we started again. From this point downwards no more snow was met with, and we were not long in reaching Tsultak Taleo, which was a lake in the middle of a mountain valley, with a few deserted shepherds' huts. We could have camped there, but decided on getting still lower down so as to give ourselves a chance of sleeping without undue breathlessness.

There were still eleven miles to march to reach Durgu, a good camping-ground at only 13,000 feet. We arrived there at four o'clock in the afternoon, thankful to find a compound in the village where we could pitch our tents, and a helpful lot of villagers ready to collect wood and milk as quickly as possible. Here we bought a sheep, which was the cause of much rejoicing among our followers. We also sent on a cooli to the next stage at Tankse to order ponies to be ready for our arrival on the following day, as we should

* "Is Memsahib all right?"

have to send back those that were with us from there. We ate for supper one of the five fowls that had accompanied us alive from Leh, and went to bed replete.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FIRST EIGHT MILES OF OUR MARCH TO TANKSE WERE PLEASANTLY EASY going. The strong-scented yellow roses grew profusely beside our path, but gradually the valley wound uphill, and when we reached the village only a few stunted willows relieved the brown monotony of the scenery. There was, however, the usual "bagh" which offered a good place for lunch. There we waited while the old ponies were off-loaded, and new ones collected.

Tankse would be the last village of any size which we should see on this particular route to Central Asia, and although it boasted of only ten dwelling places or so, we saw the remains of several others which had been built into the face of the cliff, remindful of the days when a home had to give protection against a marauding enemy no less than against weather. It was obvious that in the past the greatest ingenuity must have been exercised to turn these abodes into an actual part of the rocky feature on which they were perched. Many poles surmounted with yaks' heads were firmly fixed into these ruins, and smears of a red substance covered the sides and faces of the cliffs, a sure sign of the past presence of Lamas.

As we began our lunch we saw a superior type of Ladakhi approaching us. He made his salaam, and explained that he was a Customs official whose duty it was to watch the frontier posts through which came Tibetan trade, also to superintend the collection of duties on carpets, salt and any other goods the traders might be bringing with them. He had been at this work for twenty years, and therefore knew the country up to the Tibetan frontier very well. He was a cheerful person, and helped us to collect ponies quickly. He offered, too, to look after any kit we might not be needing for the next three weeks. He told Noel that there was a chance of getting a good head of burrhel in the nullahs close to Tankse, and we decided to spend a day and night here on our return journey from Chang Chenmo. We made use of his offer to store kit, and left two yakdans with him, reducing our baggage-ponies now to seven. From here onwards we kept three ponies for riding, as the height made marching far more tiring than at the comparatively low altitude of the country surrounding Leh.

By midday the Sakti ponymen had been paid off, getting a little extra backsheesh for their extra work over the Chang La which they had performed with the unfailing cheerfulness of their kind. During those times when they were being paid, one saw the innate good manners of the Ladakhi as opposed to his brother Kashmiri. He neither grumbled nor whined, but accepted what he was given with a smile. Naturally the rules for payment are laid down, but backsheesh is another matter. With a Kashmiri, whatever one may give him it is never enough.

We were off again, starting now in an easterly direction, and leaving the main road to Tibet proper on our right. This was separated from us by a large range of mountains, which eventually runs parallel to, and along the

southern shores of the Pangong Lake, an amazing natural feature lying at 14,000 feet, which we should pass later.

For the first three miles we walked on good grass tracks beside a rippling stream, while to right and left of us rose perpendicular cliffs for another 3,000 feet. The walls of the valley through which we were passing were sometimes jagged, sometimes rounded in their formations, whilst in colour they embodied every shade of brown, crimson and black. Throughout the trek I found the colour contrasts of the soil amazing. Here and there were great diagonal stripes of pale yellow as in a peppermint bull's-eye. The whole effect was awe-inspiring, as far away, still higher above this many-coloured wall, towered snow-capped spires of the main mountain range through which we were threading our way. On our first halt we sat with our backs to a boulder as big as a cottage, gazing at the impressive line of peaks standing out so vividly against a sky that looked as though it must have been painted, so violent was its blue. Our ponies were half a mile behind us, led by the chattering, laughing ponymen.

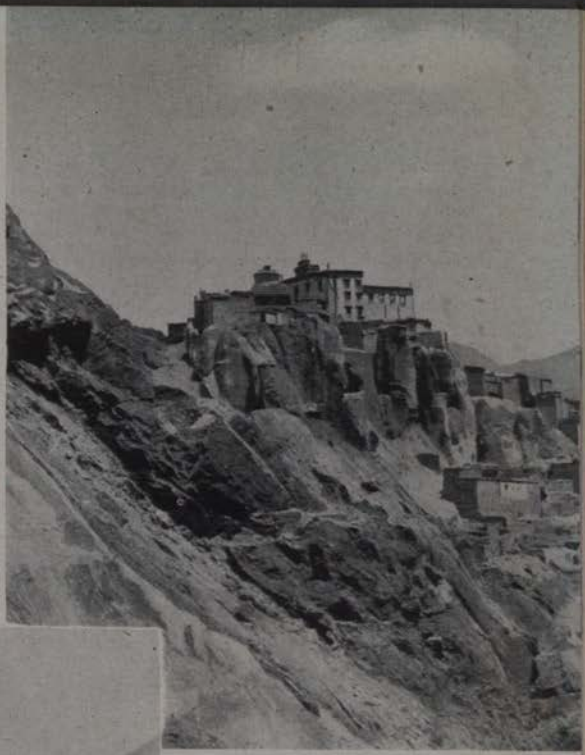
Suddenly the intense stillness was broken. The wind rose in the space of a moment, and Nature's mighty orchestra began a terrific theme. From all the gullies round us came the sound of a rushing wind suggesting a power that could sweep the world before it. Because the gullies were narrow, they acted as pipes through which the gale produced notes as from a gigantic organ, till the air was full of their wailing. This strange, exciting music lasted perhaps for ten minutes, then died away as quickly as it had risen, leaving a death-like silence behind it. Never again on our trek did we hear anything approaching the symphony made by the wind in that lonely valley.

Our ponies had caught us up, and we moved on through this gorge of strange sounds and silences, marching, as it seemed, straight into a precipitous wall of rock which towered before us. To the left of this ran the Shishak Pass at a height of 20,000 feet. We were thankful that our road did not lie over it. On reaching the foot of the wall, after an hour's marching, our track swung sharply away to the right out of the cup in which we had found ourselves, passing a few fields of crops and two tumbledown sheds marked Troktakh on our large-scale map. We could see the owners of the fields on their way down from the hill above, where they had gone to collect their goats. From here it was little more than three miles down a widening valley with green paths and a slow-running stream before we reached Muglib, which was the stage for the night. Here there were only two uninhabited huts, but after some delay we obtained some milk and a little wood from goatherds.

Muglib was a cold and windy spot that night, and owing to the many streams and lumps of grass-covered earth that were scattered over it, we had difficulty in finding anywhere to pitch our tents. Looking back, we could see the massive, sentinal rock by which our path had wound. It still seemed no smaller, and only looked about a mile away. The immensity and grandeur of this country was almost frightening.

By the time our tents were up we were half frozen with cold, but we managed to stow ourselves away for the night before the wind, which always seemed to rise in the evening, came upon us. Rahim, when he brought our supper, still wore his cotton trousers.

LAMARAYU MONASTERY

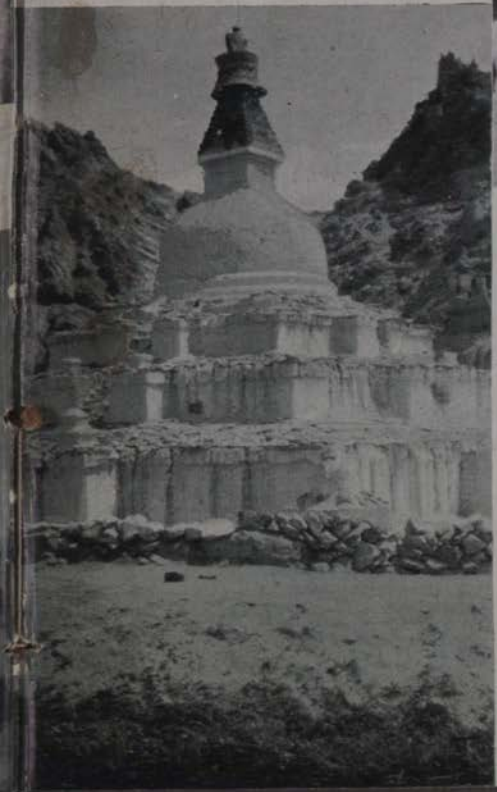


"A PILE OF STONES, PRAYER FLAGS, AND YAKS' HEADS"

THE OLD FORT AND BRIDGE

CHORTENS AND MANI WALL OUTSIDE LEH

VILLAGERS



LIBRARY
OF THE
BOMBAY
BRANCH
OF THE
ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY

CHORTEN

ON THE CHANG LA (PASS)

CROSSING THE CHANG LA. PONY DEEPLY SUNK IN SNOW

"Rahim, *where* are the thick clothes Sahib gave you?"

"I have them, Memsahib. It will be colder yet."

Of course, I knew now that he was lying. I cursed myself for not having taken the trouble to look at his kit before we left Calcutta. It was too late to do anything about it now. The best we could do was to offer him a blanket to wrap himself in while riding, but that would be as good as telling him we did not believe his story. Somehow, I didn't want him to think we doubted him. I couldn't think what he had done with the clothes. A Kashmiri might have sold them in the bazaar. We could not imagine Rahim doing that. It was dreadful to think of the cold ahead of us, and how the old man, if he persisted in his story, would suffer.

We spent a wretched night, due to breathlessness, and early the next morning heard piteous wails coming from just outside our tent. There we found a ponyman, crawling about on all fours, and quite unable to say what was wrong with him. It was obvious, though, that he was suffering from a bad attack of colic, and was asking for medicine. Noel treated him with the requisite dose from our store, and handed him over to one of the goat-herds to be looked after. There we had to leave him.

Snow had fallen in the night, and even the lower slopes of the mountains around us were covered with a light powdering which disappeared when the sun had been up for an hour. Our route led on eastwards through the same valley, which became gradually narrower. We slogged along through deep sand, the ponies up to their hocks. One of the sudden changes of temperature so common in Ladakh in summer had taken place, and the heat of the sun on our backs was something very like torture, yet when we took a rest beneath a rock we were glad of any warm clothing that was handy, as in the shade the wind was bitter. It seemed we were in for a dull march. At first the scenery reminded us of the hated Indus Valley, but soon we reached a mysterious-looking lake called Tsearh Tso. Entirely surrounded by sand, its surface choked with red weed almost obliterating the face of its waters, the lake had a sinister appearance suggesting it might be the lurking place of some evil, elemental thing.

Passing on from this morbid atmosphere, another two miles brought us to a more normal one. After reaching a stony ridge, down the sides of which trickled innumerable streams, we found ourselves at Chakar Talao—another lake, bare and devoid of any life, either animal or vegetable, but reflecting on its surface a remarkable shade of opaque aquamarine merging into patches of cloudy jade. From here the road went downhill rapidly until we reached a dilapidated Mani wall with a chorten beside it decorated with horns of burrhel and yak. This appeared to coincide with a stage that was marked on the map as Yaktil. Then, on breasting a sandy ridge jutting out from the spur upon our left, we had our first sight of the Pangong lake.

We saw an immense sapphire, deeper, bluer than any ever seen, lying in the lap of surrounding mountains. The sight of it was paralysing. There it lay, its colour alive, and as we now saw, for ever changing as clouds passed above it. Now there were streaks of a still deeper blue, now peacock green, the colours dazzling against the contrast of mountains that were golden in the strong sunlight.

We hurried on towards it, and on the western shore of that strange, dead sea we stopped to gaze. The lake is an immense mountain gem, the sight of which can only be given to those who travel far. No photograph could suggest its colour or its size, or the mysterious atmosphere that hangs about it. I know that to have seen it is to me worth every discomfort in the world. I cannot have exaggerated my impressions at the time, for a vivid memory of the lake as I saw it then has never left me. Every detail is imprinted in my mind, I think for ever. I can still hear the catch of the breath that came from both of us. I can see the colours of the surrounding mountains change from sand to deepest brown, splashed here and there with sienna, flecked sometimes with crimson like an immense Persian carpet that reached up to gloomy nullahs terminating in glaciers and snow-covered peaks of 20,000 feet. The clarity of the air in Tibet renders surrounding mountains and their black, clear-cut shadows almost startlingly distinct. The sun's rays cut through the atmosphere with tremendous power. Always in my mind I can see the lake, fifty miles long from east to west, holding no living thing in its brackish waters. Once beside it, I tore off my stockings. Every pebble beneath the surface showed clearly. I must feel that water. It was icy. Deadly. Little foam-splashed waves lapped round my feet. The vivid blue vista went on for miles. Mysterious and beautiful as they were, I could have spent days beside those waters.

There are places one visits for only a short time while living an ordinary life. One sees them, but forgets them easily. Who can remember the twists of every country lane, or the bend of every river? But I can see the ridge where we had our first sight of the lake as clearly as if I stood upon it now.

Reluctantly we turned northwards. We had another six miles to do to reach Phobrang, lying at 16,000 feet, which must surely be the highest village in the world. We were going still farther away from people, to the almost unknown country that lay beyond the Marsemik Pass.

As we were leaving the lake, a storm came up. Now we saw the Pangong as she looked when angry. Waves rolled across the surface of waters that had been calm and limpid only a few moments ago. The blue darkened to a malevolent black. The atmosphere was savage. For the next few miles it seemed we battled against elemental things.

. . . . .

It was now that I fully realized the meaning of this experience. I realized, too, that I was becoming a little light-headed from continual height. Reading again the diary that I kept, I know that this was so. The feeling I had is difficult to describe. My body seemed to be shrinking. It was always tired, but now tiredness had become a habit and seemed to matter less. So did food. I never wanted to eat, but something inside me, perhaps that mysterious thing known as a person's spirit, had never seemed so alive. Noel and I spoke little. Never did we discuss our ordinary life back in civilized surroundings. We had stepped right out of that world into this where there was space and silence.

Much of my diary would make nonsense were I to insert it here, and yet—then it made sense, at least, to me. I wonder now what part of me did

I leave beside the Pangong lake that has never come back to me. In what lay the compelling power of the lake?

At Phobrang we pitched our tents beside a stream at the southern end of the straggling village. The Tankse ponymen were paid off, and were lucky enough to pick up some wood for their return journey. Noel sent for the Lumbador to explain our requirements, and then we had a set-back. It appeared quite impossible to obtain sufficient animals to start on the following day. Our baggage would now travel upon the backs of yaks, for these odd animals, being unable to exist below 10,000 feet, stand continued height better than ponies. Riding-ponies only would be taken, but it seemed these would have to be re-shod, and a good supply of rations for both them and their drivers collected before they would be ready to start upon the final stages of our journey to Chang Chenmo which might last, counting the return journey, anything up to three weeks. We had therefore to resign ourselves to a full day's halt, but on the whole were not sorry for the chance of overhauling and redistributing our kit. We were grateful, too, for a little rest.

As to the appearance of a yak. Try to imagine a clumsy, bovine animal, with its shoulders considerably higher than the rest of its body. Then imagine a rough coat of brownish black inclining to grey on the withers; a large, stooping head surmounted by thick horns from one to two feet long and about twelve inches in girth, growing outwards and curling up. Add to this an enormous, bushy tail, extending to below the hocks, and a thick fringe of long, matted black hair hanging from the shoulders and flanks, and you may have some idea of the domestic yak. The wild yak is larger, with thicker, longer horns. These animals make good use of their horns whilst being loaded, as we were soon to discover, but their drivers have a clever way of defeating their onslaught. They gather the beasts together in a ring with their heads turned inwards, so that any damage they do with their horns is to each other.

Noel had noticed quantities of fish from six to eight inches long in many pools of the stream by which we were camping, and now, by way of varying our menu, he unearthed a hitherto unused mosquito-net from his kit, and proceeded to transgress the laws of fishing. By damming up a narrow channel with stones, submerging one side of the net—holding up the other —and employing a gang of villagers equipped with sticks, stones and strange cries, he managed to drive into it a sufficient quantity of succulent trout to provide the entire population of Phobrang as well as ourselves with a meal.

They tasted good? Straight out of a mountain stream and eaten with huge hunks of Rahim's soda bread spread with butter from the Delhi Dairy Farm!

By morning we were told that seven yaks would be needed to carry our kit, and two to carry their own rations as well as those of their drivers. Next came the question of a milk supply for the journey, and for this we had to take fifteen goats and their goatherd. This sounded rather expensive, until we were told that we should only be required to pay for the milk they gave, which eventually worked out at two and a half annas a day! The goats were paraded for inspection and Noel added two live sheep to their number, while a third was killed to start us on our way. Two hens out of the lot

we had brought from Leh still survived, but they were gradually growing thinner and did not promise a very satisfying meal. Wood does not exist in Chang Chenmo, and must be replaced by a scrubby growth called bortsa, and, failing that, by dung which would be collected daily by the pony and yak drivers who numbered eight.

For emergency cooking or boiling water, we had, of course, our Meta solid-spirit stove, which so far had given every satisfaction. Now, unfortunately, owing to the height, it required two tablets of fuel instead of one to boil a kettle. Even then our water never really boiled. The best it did was to approach fairly close to boiling-point. As soon as Noel had seen the whole party assembled on the evening of our second day at Phobrang, we turned in early, in preparation for the following day's march, which promised to be long and tiring, as we should have to cross the Marsemik Pass, which is 18,500 feet above sea level.

I thought of the pass that night after I was in bed. This time, surely, I would be able to stand the crossing better. We were now at 16,000 feet, and I felt no ill effects beyond a certain degree of slackness. At Zingaru—our camping-stage below the Chang Pass—I had felt really ill, yet there we had been no higher than the present stage. Surely I was becoming acclimatized! That is a point about mountain sickness; once at a lower altitude the effects of it pass quickly, and it is difficult to remember how ill you felt, or to relive its deadly, atrophying depression.

As everything had been prepared over-night, we got away in good time and for two miles followed the course of a stream to a place called Chugra, the very last inhabited spot beyond Phobrang. It consisted of two broken-down sheep-pens, and was quite tenantless. From here we turned sharp right-handed over a hill, to find ourselves in a much wider valley running north-east in the formation of a series of rolling downs covered with shale, and devoid of a tree or blade of grass, beyond the few patches growing beside a tiny trickle of water running down the middle. Rising steadily, we followed the stream uphill for about seven miles, halting at a deserted shepherd's hut. Here the coolis began to give trouble, saying they would go no farther that day, but would cross the pass on the morrow. We overcame their objections by going on to the pass ourselves and, as we expected, they soon followed us. From this time onwards we had no trouble with them, and they were a cheery lot of rascals to have with us. One of them, whose name sounded like Punsook, appointed himself permanent pony-holder to me, and kept us laughing by the perpetual grin on his Hogarthian countenance, and his general air of looking for some new mischief to perpetrate, alternating with sorrowing regret for an imagined hardship which had fallen upon him as retribution for a previous crime.

The yaks offered much entertainment. They proceeded slowly and with dignity, each requiring a driver to hit him along, and occasionally stopping, despite the driver's efforts, to indulge in fights with each other. The goats wandered about all over the hill, pursued by their unfortunate goatherd.

And so we approached the Marsemik La, separating the uninhabited tracts of Western Tibet from Ladakh proper. The going, until we came to the last few hundred feet, was comparatively easy, comparing favourably with

our climb up to the Chang La. I began to take heart. We saw several Kyang* on the southern slopes of the pass, also some large marmots. Otherwise the country offered a vista of utter desolation.

We reached the top of the pass in bright sunshine, and although the view to the north presented nothing but wave upon wave of brown mountains reaching apparently to infinity, that to the south, over the valleys we had so lately travelled, was magnificent, even in this country of marvels. From right to left, stretching from above Shusol in the east to the Tankse nullah in the west, ran a great ridge of snow-capped giants, separating the Muglib Valley and the Pangong lake from another direct route leading to Tankse, which goes by the name of the "Valley of the Nomads". From end to end this ridge is fifty miles long and seldom lower than 20,000 feet, and that day, as we saw it from the Marsemik, it looked like the giant keyboard of a piano, on which the black notes were the sombre-shaded nullahs, separating one ivory summit from its neighbour.

"Can't we go back to Tankse by the Valley of the Nomads?" I asked. Noel seemed to think this a good suggestion, and said he would look at the map to see what difficulties the route offered.

Once over the pass the weather changed abruptly. Clouds, which had gathered round the hilltops to the north and east, rolled down upon us. Now that the descent had begun, we all found ourselves suffering from the inevitable splitting headache and depths of depression which had attacked us (though to a lesser degree) on the Chang La. I have described before the effects of mountain sickness. It is enough to say that all of us—even the local men—were struggling and fighting for breath, and for enough energy to keep going. Our only relief was that here there was not the melting snow that we had found upon the Chang, and therefore no digging out of ponies. Noel, who has, I think, greater endurance than most, was a good deal the worse for wear. As for Rahim—when I looked at him, I wondered if we should get him back alive. The thought did little to help me fight my depression.

Noel decided to stop at a stage called Rimdi, about three miles below the pass, for the night. This was still 17,000 feet high, and on reaching it none of us felt much better. I was lying prone, when Rahim came up to me on his pony. He slid off it to the ground. "Memsahib, I die," he said, and lay still.

From the look upon his face I thought he would. Terror for him filled me. I had heard of stories of Indians who could die at will. His old, rugged face looked dreadful. There was a dark-grey shadow upon it.

Noel produced brandy. "Give him a swig of this."

"He's a Mohammedan . . ."

"To hell with that. Give it to him."

We forced the brandy into his mouth. We rubbed his limbs, got a tent up and laid him in it. He showed little sign of life. The wind was rising and snow falling, and we were again on a bare mountain side at 17,500 feet. Bortsa for fuel was scanty. We piled blankets on Rahim, rubbed him and chafed him. Beyond a sick misery, I can't describe much of what I felt.

* Wild horses.

The mountains were so inevitable; Nature so strong and so relentless; shelter so very far away. We were all far more ill than we had been upon the Chang La. I don't know why this should have been so, for the heights of the passes were almost identical. Perhaps it was because this crossing had been made at the end of a long march instead of at the beginning.

Our spirit-stove proved a blessing. We were able to keep a constant supply of nearly boiling water until such time as the camp fire was lighted and a larger kettle available. Samandu was the only servant with any kick left in him. He helped considerably. To add to the falling snow, a thunderstorm had worked up along the ridge to our north-west, and during its course a first-class avalanche broke away from one of the peaks about two miles from our camp with a roar that was malevolent and frightening. Although we were in no possible danger, we felt dreadfully isolated and exposed in our little tents, and quickly piled great heaps of stones over each peg and round the flaps to defeat the violence of the wind which grew every second in fury. Added to our miseries was the dreadful thought, were we to be responsible for Rahim's death?

I shan't forget that night. We lay shivering in our camp-beds, the wind whistling and roaring around us. One deep breath—oh, for the strength to draw one deep breath! Thought swarmed and raced, with one's body so weak, and one's brain, it seemed, so terribly alive.

By daylight things had not improved. Apparently we had all decided to swear we felt better, and—incredible though it seemed—Rahim was still alive. In fact, he was so much recovered that he expressed shame at not having been able to cook a meal for Sahib and Memsahib on the previous night. We determined to move farther down at all costs, but must wait until the weather changed. This did not happen until two o'clock in the afternoon. Noel insisted that I stayed in bed till then. At the first streak of sunshine, a rush was made to strike camp, and he got two of the yaks off at once with their drivers, sending me with them, with Punsook to drag my pony along.

We started off down a precipitous path that was no more than a foot wide, flanked by a foreboding wall of rock, and hanging over a cliff which carried on for perhaps 1,000 feet to the river below. This narrow path, on a slant, led up and down, and the ascents and descents of its meanderings were so steep that I held on to everything—saddle, and pony's mane—to stay upon him. Once I got off and tried to walk, but my limbs were weak, as if I had just got up after a long illness. I could hardly draw a breath. A snowstorm caught up with us, and then I couldn't see the path. Punsook carried on, plodding with a steady step, dragging my pony, sometimes calling to a yak driver to come and hold its tail while he himself steadied the poor beast by hanging on to his head. Only this saved the pony from falling over the khud. With every step it stumbled, and our pace could not have been more than a mile an hour. I can't remember if I was frightened, but I know my body was contracted and taut. Each step forward seemed something overcome.

After about three miles of this the snowstorm ceased, and Noel, with the rest of the party, caught me up. Rahim was riding, well wrapped in blankets.

At last we were escaping from the breathlessness of a great height, and on arriving at a more or less sheltered ledge close to the foot of the Panglung nullah we halted for the night after what had been only a short march.

That night we found it hard to sleep, but when I slept, I had my first nightmare of the trip. In my dreams my pony kept stumbling, always nearly falling, and below me at the bottom of the 1,000-foot wall of rock was the rushing river.

We awoke to a world white with snow about two inches deep, but by nine o'clock it had melted and we were off again downwards, bound south for Tsolu. During the first part of the march the weather was fair and became warmer, but about midday black clouds gathered and came sweeping down the valley behind us. We hurried on, managing to keep just ahead of the storm. Sometimes our path, after crossing to the left bank of the River Rimdi, was too narrow for us to do more than crawl along the edge of the cliff. Just before reaching Pamzel a few icy drops of rain caught us, driving us hurriedly over a mile of stony river bed and one small ridge to a more sheltered spot on the sandy bank of the Chang Chenmo river. This had been a long march over bad going, but we were down to 14,700 feet, and so felt better. We had to wait some time for our tents, owing to the refractory habits of the yaks, but the scenery gave us plenty to look at.

The bed of the Chang Chenmo River at the place where we were now meaning to camp is about half a mile wide. Down the middle of it ran a swift but narrow stream, winding its way across the dull, slate-grey bed which was strewn with enormous boulders left high and dry after heavy floods of past years. To the west rose a sinister giant of a mountain with a glacier terminating in an overhanging precipice of ice which descended towards the smaller foothills above the river bank. In the distance soared the peaks enclosing the river on either side until it joins the Shyok, forty miles away. All was silent. We were too far away even to hear the sound of the stream coursing down the river bed.

The tents arrived, and the bank on which we pitched them offered a large patch of scrubby bortsa for which we were thankful. Our coolis warned us that actually we were barely far enough away from the water course for safety, adding the information that rivers rose with great rapidity in this part of the world. Opposite to us upon the north bank was a precipice of light brown shale rising sheer for several thousand feet, cut into deeply by narrow water courses, and stretching backwards and upwards to further ranges capped with snow. Eastwards, looking up the river bed towards the Lanak Pass and the frontier of Tibet, ran a range of hills, some with crimson summits, owing their colour to a type of sandstone fairly common in the district. They stood out with startling clarity, and round them, as far as eye could see, all the tremendous force of Tibetan weather was venting itself in vertical water-spouts and horizontal blizzards. Towards evening the wind rose round the camp, filling our tent, clothing and food with sand. Yet our spirits rose. We were at last in Chang Chenmo. Noel was within appreciable distance of his quarry, the graceful horned antelope. We slept contentedly.

While waiting to get away the next morning, I attacked Rahim on the

subject of his clothes. He was just wrapping himself up in a blanket, so it seemed a good moment to do so.

"Tell me the truth about those warm clothes, Rahim."

He hung his head after the way of an Indian servant who is at a loss. "Memsahib . . ."

"Yes?"

"Memsahib . . . my son—need money."

I understood at last. His wretched son was always needing money, and always Rahim sent it to him. The son would willingly have drained his father of everything. The old man had, after all, sold his clothes in the Calcutta bazaar. There was nothing to be said. Clever people would say if they knew the story, "I told you so. No Indian servant. . . ." I knew it all. And Rahim felt he had let us down. He kept his eyes fixed upon the ground as he spoke to me. It is odd how, when thinking of absolute honesty, people think only of the little things and forget the big.

We left for the next stage, Kiam, and the last but one before Noel's shooting block would be reached. The road led due east along the south bank of the river for about four miles, where we had to make our first crossing. After the night's storm the water flowed rapidly and was well above our ponies' knees. Although a snapshot does not show the pace at which the water raced, there were moments when I felt it must sweep my pony's feet away from under him, leaving me in the torrent. The yaks crossed in massed formation, making little of it. Again today the scenery varied much owing to the many different colours of the rocks and soil. Soon after we had left the precipices round our camp at Tsolu, the ridges of mountain rose more gradually in rounded curves of green, brown and even crimson. There was no sign of a tree or blade of grass, just the gigantic ripples of the hills rolling away from us in kaleidoscopic magnificence until, crest upon crest, they merged into the distant horizon and were silhouetted against a sky of metallic blue. Despite the altitude of this valley the heat was intense at midday, and a shimmering haze danced eerily over the stones in the river bed.

On reaching the vicinity of Kiam, there was great excitement among our followers as from the last rise before the camping-ground a few miles farther on we saw three antelope grazing quietly about half a mile away on some patches of miraculous green grass. Then we realized that here were the hot springs for which the place was noted on the map. The water, bubbling from the earth, has quite a high temperature and trickles away over the rubbly ground encouraging the growth of grass and so forming a favourite feeding ground for animals and birds.

A messenger was sent back hurriedly to fetch Noel's rifle from the back of the yak which carried it, and on its arrival he and Sultana Malik set out upon their stalk, while I rested on the ground.

(*Extract from Noel's diary.*)

"We slipped down to the ledge above the river bed 100 feet beneath us, so getting on to a lower level than that on which an antelope were grazing. Then we crept forward below a sheltering bank for nearly 500 yards, which brought us to a point at which the general direction of the animal's

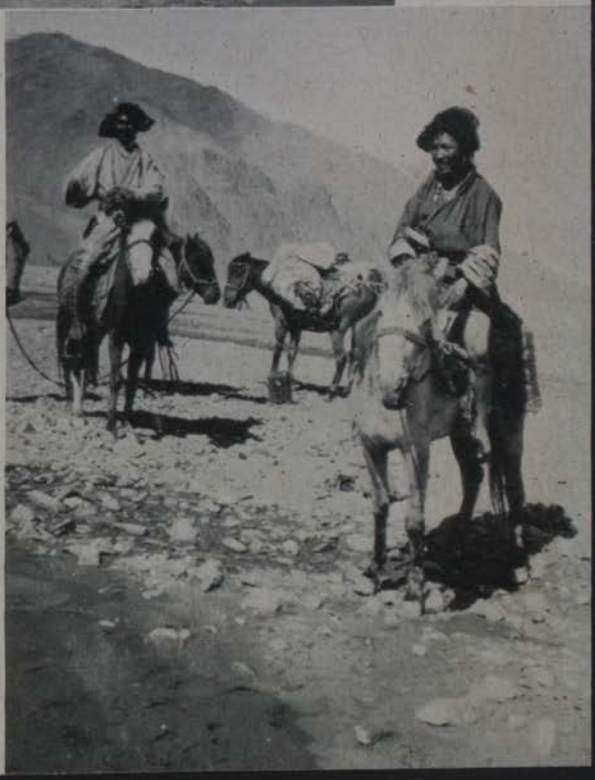
HELPING PONIES OUT ON NORTH SIDE OF CHANG LA

CLIMBING TO THE PASS

OUR CAMP AT TSOLU AMID BORTSA SCRUB

"THE YAKS CROSSED IN MASSED FORMATION"

SAMANDU CROSSING CHANG CHENMO RIVER



PUNSOOK

YAKS AND THEIR DRIVERS IN CHANG CHENMO

STRIKING CAMP IN CHANG CHENMO

riverward meandering ought to have been intercepted. But he had got there before us. He was over the bank, and we found him in full view at a hundred and fifty yards as we breathlessly crawled round a small shoulder of rock. I tried to get myself into as comfortable a lying position as possible, which left only the upper part of the antelope's body in view. Forgetting my thumping lungs and heart (height 17,400 feet), the violent glare on the foresight, and my general tendency to shoot high, I let drive at the slowly moving beast and missed him clean—right over his back. Two more useless shots followed his retreating form as he bounded gracefully over a patch of snow, and I had to acknowledge the complete failure of my first effort.

"The shikari tried to comfort me by saying that all sportsmen began by shooting badly in Chang Chenmo owing to the difficulty of drawing a steady breath at this height, but I would not let it go at that. There, 1,000 yards away, went the scared antelope who was soon joined by three others. They bounded up the face of a nullah in some hills overlooking the hot springs, and up the nullah and after that antelope I went. One hope only remained—first to get down wind from them, then up the hill and above them, and finally to try to cut them off from whatever distant valley they were making for. This I determined to do. Up and up we went, catching now and then a fleeting glance of the quarry as they now quietly grazed their way up a nullah parallel to the one we were in.

"After climbing for about 1,500 feet, with breath coming in gasps and helpless glances cast ever upwards, we halted for a moment or two and decided on a spot below some jagged rocks upon the summit, where with any luck we ought to get on terms with them again. Then we set our faces for the last few hundred feet before reaching the crest. I was a bit comforted to see Sultana Malik blowing as much as I was. Once on the crest of the hill we had 200 yards to go left-handed to the rocks in question, and on reaching them and peering cautiously over we saw an empty nullah and no sign of the antelope! They could not have swung towards us without our seeing them, so they must have crossed a low pass opposite to us, and were probably now in the next nullah towards which the wind had suddenly changed so that it blew directly from us. One last try must be made. Dropping down from the crest we dashed straight down the slope in such a direction that we might with luck get across the line of the pass before our wind had been carried over it into the nullah beyond. This was achieved, and another short climb brought us to a good point from which to spy. There they were about 400 yards below us in the next nullah, apparently undisturbed despite the efforts of a wild yak who, having both seen and winded us, was galloping wildly up the opposite hill.

"There was only one way to get near them, and that was on the seat of my breeches, slithering down the razor-edged shale from one place of cover to another. Nearer and nearer I got. I began to debate on the 200-yard sight instead of the 300, and decided on it not a second too soon for up went their heads as they started moving downhill.

"I pushed Sultana Malik in front of me to use his shoulder as a rest, and to take that down-hill shot at a three-quarter length mark which we all hate so much. The bullet struck with the thud that takes a load off the stalker's

mind. Down went the antelope, and down we slid to him, Sultana Malik bent on a 'Hallal' before all life had left the beast, and I to examine more closely my first Tibetan antelope, to shoot which I had travelled nearly 2,000 miles since leaving Calcutta. I had got a 22½-inch head, which was not outstanding, but all the same a recompense for such an ignominious start."

On his return I wondered what to do about the seat of Noel's trousers. Most men mind about the seat of their "pants". Perhaps sport on the snow-line would cause him to cast such inhibitions from him. While I was wondering about this he suddenly said, "You look rather like a boy with a wig on!"

I looked at myself in my small mirror. My red hair had grown to an awkward length. Most wigs seem to be red. How right he was.

CHAPTER FIVE

I MUST NOT GIVE THE IMPRESSION THAT THROUGHOUT OUR JOURNEY I WAS always a heartening comrade and the perfect travelling companion. On many occasions just the opposite was the truth. Once over the two big passes, and at a consistent height of anything from seventeen to nineteen thousand feet, my temper was often diabolical. On the marches I had a fervent and driving desire to pick a quarrel with the person closest to me. That person was Noel, but he—and this infuriated me—was seldom close enough.

On a trek such as this you seldom march abreast, for the reason that Ladakhi ponies are accustomed to follow nose to tail in a caravan. Often, even the tail of Noel's pony was not before me. Noel wanted to harden himself for the stalking that lay ahead and insisted upon walking, and his pace was faster than that of my stumbling pony. It was useless my bellowing imprecations, even had I the breath to do so. While I sat on the numnah saddle being led along by Punsook, I could see my husband's figure striding half a mile to a mile ahead of me, and always increasing the distance between us. You cannot make hill ponies hurry. You don't so much ride them as sit on them, for they are indifferent to any "aid" and follow only their driver.

Noel was happy. He was nearing his farthest objective, and the fever of the chase was mounting in him. I doubt if women can ever quite understand the emotions belonging to this fever, and I know it must be anathema to all those who are anti-blood sport, but then, unless such people are rigid vegetarians, I find their attitude equally difficult to understand. That anyone should be carnivorous in appetite, eating meat that has been driven to a slaughter-house, or a chicken that has had its neck wrung, and yet shudder at the thought of a sportsman shooting a pheasant or enduring rigours and hardship to pursue a wild beast, seems to me illogical, although I am prepared to admit that for a short time this fever of the chase can change the most understanding and human of men into a creature with but one idea—the hunt. I know now, many years later, that women who try to assert their own personalities upon a man at such a time are consummate bores to him. Yet, in the light of experience, I believe that this may even apply to his

activities in ordinary surroundings. After all, most men hunt something—either success, achievement, or fame. Some may hunt these things for the sake of a woman, but I have an idea that the best do not. In any case, many of us wives attempt to frustrate a man by demanding too much of his attention while the hunt is on. If he is a strong character he resents this and wonders why he has ever allowed his freedom to be so hampered. The other kind too often gives in, and a woman may find herself late in life left with a poor, unenterprising creature for whom she is herself in some way responsible. But it is easy to be wise in middle age.

I may, in my saner moments, have understood something of all this even at that time. If I did I certainly hid it well, but at that altitude I don't think I was always very sane. The most unwarrantable, petty thoughts poured into my mind. I acquired a dreadful pleasure from them. I wanted to nag and argue; foolishly: after the way of the lowest feminine mentality. I wanted to cry, "There is no other woman in the world you would have dragged to this God-forsaken country!" Oh yes, I know what I have written about my feelings near the Pangong lake. I didn't remember them now. I know it was I who had urged Noel to bring me. I put that thought from my mind. I was concerned only with myself. My breeches hung around my waist. My hair had grown from its short shingle. The dry air had made it straight, and it hung lankly. Perhaps because of many sleepless nights my face looked haggard and sunken in the little mirror I had brought with me. I was undoubtedly becoming a hag. Other women would pity me when I returned to civilization. I should slink about, a gaunt, queer-looking object; not a woman at all, just a female of the species who looked years older than her age. All because of the hardships inflicted on me by my sport-crazy husband. Poor me. Poor, *poor* me. I could easily have cried about myself.

Few of my thoughts on those marches in Chang Chenmo were admirable. Old grievances came to me. It was maddening that I couldn't tell Noel about them while the words were flowing into my mind so splendidly. Words that I felt were pointed, just and definitely hurtful. Of course they were just! If I hadn't spoken them before it was because I was too loving a wife. It was a mistake to be so loving. Every man needed a shaking now and again.

But luckily Noel could not have heard all I wanted to say even if I had shouted it. When I caught up with him at a place where we had agreed to pause, he always seemed grateful to me for what he called, "Coming along so well." To my sour face he would remark, "Poor old girl! You look tucked up. Anything wrong?"

Nothing was wrong, I would tell him as I mentally cursed men who poured coals of fire on the heads of unbalanced creatures like myself.

Sometimes during these periods of depression I wondered whether I could possibly be suffering from the poison which, in the upper regions of the Himalayas, natives believe is exhaled by certain plants. This idea is of course ridiculed by Europeans, but the hill men are definite about their belief in it. "Here," they will say, "is bad for 'bhik'.* There (even though the district may be at a greater altitude) the air is clear of it."

* Poison.

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Whether such beliefs are nonsense or not, there is no doubt that the deadly aconite, for example, flourishes luxuriantly in the higher ranges where the spike-like heads of its vivid blue blossom have a striking effect, shooting up as they do from a little patch of bright green grass beside a stream.

It must be difficult for anyone who has not been there to appreciate the savage loneliness of that country, or the exact quality of the deep silence that reigns between the howling blasts of wind. In Europe few people know real silence. There is the buzz of insects, the rustle of trees, or the sound of a bird. But here sometimes the stillness was that of a sepulchre.

We now had only eleven miles to do to reach Ningri, our final stage where we would camp until a sizable head of antelope was shot. Evidently Noel's bombardment of the previous day had scared away the herd we had seen, for during the first eight miles the only sign of life was hare, marmots and a few brahmini duck who had been browsing near the hot springs. After again crossing the river we struck half right over a couple of spurs, coming in sight of an odd-looking hog-backed hill between two higher ranges. This was the stage. Sultana Malik said there was water at its eastern foot, and that there would be antelope in plenty to be found here.

The kit was a good way behind us, and as we waited for it we watched the gay antics of a kyang who suddenly appeared and seemed anxious to make friends. There were plenty of these in Chang Chenmo, and they are fascinating animals with red-brown backs shading away to white beneath the neck and belly and down the legs. They look much like our home-bred pony, but with a touch of mule. They carry their heads high, sniffing the air, and are amazingly graceful in the way they prance along. The ponymen besought Noel to shoot them for their skins, out of which the natives make mocassins. It was a repellant idea when they approached us so apparently without fear.

Just before arriving at the camping-ground we had seen an antelope in an open piece of "maidan". Further inspection showed its head to be too small to shoot, and Noel did not stalk it. Directly after tea, not anxious to spend longer than was necessary at this height, he started out again for another try. I wished I could go with him. The rolling hills looked smooth and easy going, but we were at 19,000 feet, and I found I could only walk with a great effort. Noel's heart and endurance may have been stronger than mine, or perhaps suffering from stalking fever as he did, it was a case of mind defeating matter. He spied a herd of four antelopes, amongst them a sizable head. "I found myself so blown that I could hardly crawl to the top of the hill where I expected to find them opposite to me," he said afterwards. "When I got there I found I had misjudged the distance and had to take my shot at 250 yards." He got the head, which was not a bad one, of 23 inches.

I spent a bad night, feeling sick, light-headed and stone cold. In the morning, although I had promised myself that this time I would set off upon my pony with the party, it left without me at eight o'clock. Noel was determined upon a larger head, even if he went much farther afield in search of it. I lay in my camp bed and ruminated over the strangeness of men. My husband at this moment, gasping and blown, carrying a heavy rifle,

would be struggling up a hill half mad with excitement and feeling neither sick nor sorry for himself. What should I do until his return? I had brought books. I must have imagined I should want to read them. Yet I didn't. In this mountain country there was no time to spare for books. You could learn more from looking than from reading. I should have known it would be so, for I have never understood those people who can read for most of the day on board ship. I even find it hard to read in a garden in England. It is a personal idiosyncrasy or weakness, whichever you like. Only a short distance away was the frontier of Tibet proper. The forbidden land. What nonsense it was that we could not cross that frontier . . . as if anyone would know. Chinese guards could not be at every point along those vast ranges. But that was stupid, because you couldn't just walk across mountains of over 20,000 feet. They formed their own barrier to a country. The guards, of course, would be on the few passes. But it was maddening not to be able to go on. On and on—for ever. Why not? Only yesterday I'd thought of Chang Chenmo as a god-forsaken country. My reactions are contradictory? Well—whose aren't? In any case there is the power and persuasion of far-off mountains.

I couldn't and I wouldn't lie in bed any longer. A chair outside in the sunlight sounded pleasant. All the same, what would I miss? There was nothing of this land I could afford to miss. I decided to follow Noel. I found that even to begin to do so needed an effort. One would have thought it easy to throw one's feet over the side of a camp-bed, but it wasn't. Having achieved a sitting position on the bed I sat there and blew. Slowly, like someone getting up for the first time after a long illness, I drew as many clothes on to my body as I could without standing on my feet. The air that greeted me through the tent flaps was deliciously pure and crisp.

Punsook was sitting on his hunkers not far from the tent. When I called him he came running, a grin on his comical face. I signed to him that I wanted my pony. Rahim, who adopted the airs of the well-trained bearer whenever he could, came and helped me on to it. Rahim always seemed able to make himself understood. "Tell Punsook I want to find Sahib and see him shoot an antelope," I said. Punsook answered with a chuckle. I never knew what it was he found to laugh about unless it was myself. We started off.

I hope no one will now expect an exciting story of how we got lost. You don't get lost with Tibetan ponymen. There seems little of their vast country that they do not know. I hadn't an idea how Punsook was to set about finding Noel in that labyrinth of mountains, but he appeared to have no doubt about the way. The day was exquisite. A gentle breeze fanned us. The sun was bright, and the sky a vivid blue. By the streams the going was grassy. You could almost have imagined yourself enjoying such a day on the South Downs at Home. Only there one would have felt full of energy. One's legs could not have carried one fast enough over the springy turf. I could just imagine it. To think of such energy now was to wonder what in heaven had happened to my limbs. I could barely have walked a mile, and then only at a crawling pace. The pony, his head down, carried my limp body. I hope this does not suggest cruelty. He, like Punsook, had been bred at 16,000 feet, and like

all Ladakhis and Tibetans, he understood only a slow and deliberate pace. Punsook led him, whistling cheerfully, and uttering strange imprecations every time he stumbled over stones.

I did at last begin to wonder whether Punsook and I might be getting lost. It began to seem a little crazy of me to have left the camp to traverse a stretch of that immense country with a boy who could not understand a word I said. But certainly the boy showed no doubt as to direction. Climbing steeply, we followed a nullah for about three miles up to its head. I saw a herd of twelve antelope, and began to take heart. Punsook turned round at the sight of them to grin at me encouragingly. If he had found antelope the probability was that he would also find Noel, who I supposed must have left them in search of a bigger head. The smooth vastness, the unearthly silence—both contributed again to that feeling of being on another planet; one that was cold and very still. I would have liked to have asked Punsook if he really knew the spot he was making for, but of course he would not have understood. It looked as if he and I might wander on in that silence for ever.

On reaching the head of the nullah I saw range after range of white-topped mountains in the distance. From them a great valley ran to where I was. In the middle of it, far away, sparkled the waters of a lake. On either side of me waves of hills rolled to apparent infinity. The altitude made the colours too vivid to seem real.

I must have been standing at about 20,000 feet. Suddenly Punsook pointed to a spot below me, and there I saw Noel with the rest of the party. When I reached him I found that he had got his antelope, and that it had a really good head measuring 23½ inches. It completed the number he was allowed to shoot.

Now barely two ranges of hills separated us from the forbidden frontier, and we realized with a feeling of sadness that we had come to the farthest point of the trek. There was something depressing in the thought of turning and retracing our steps, yet there was not too much time left of Noel's leave for all we had in view. An ovis ammon would only be found 150 miles away to the south of the Indus. We had more travelling to do yet.

I wished I could have taken Punsook back to Srinagar as my pony-boy. He was a lively person to have about the camp. More inherent mischief radiated from him than from anyone I had ever met, and mischief and gaiety are hard to resist in a young thing. It is only the adult who becomes a bore when impish. Punsook was the acknowledged wit of our party, and whenever we rested always the centre of a circle of listeners. I would have given much to understand his stories. They went on and on, only interrupted by laughter from the coolis. He had brought the avoidance of hard work to a fine art. While our tents were being pitched, he would hammer in a peg, and go on hammering only while watched. Otherwise he sat back on his hunkers grinning while the work was finished by others, yet none of them seemed to resent this. He was indifferent to weather or cold, and often removed his ragged top garment, displaying a nether one in worse rags, and held together over the shoulder by a string of beads. My pony had such an affection for him that on the march it refused to move a step in any direction except at his heels. Sometimes, in order to get on when Punsook was plodding more

slowly than ever, it was he who needed a tap with a stick and not so much the pony.

We found far more water coming down the river than on our outward journey, which made the crossings more exciting. Rahim sat his pony like an old image, and the yaks crossed in their usual massed formation and with great deliberation. One felt that no torrent could ever sweep them off their feet.

Noel, who had long ago given up shaving, now looked like a prophet with an impressive growth of beard. His hair badly needed cutting, but my offer to do so was refused. The least vain men seem to be fussy about their hair.

I approached the Marsemik in a grim if slightly apprehensive mood. On the top of the pass it was really good-bye to what Sultana Malik called the "Taklif" of Chang Chenmo. I think the word means a grumbling kind of worry. This time the crossing affected none of us so badly. The weather was good, the air clear, and there was still less snow, so that it was possible to see the many varieties of tiny plants snuggling around the boulders. We were hungry by the time we stopped for food a good way down the Ladakhi side of the pass. Here we found a crowd of the first nomads we had seen, who were on their way from the Nubra Valley to Phobrang to barter. The headman (it is strange how the tribal instinct prevails !) was amazingly good-looking. While I rolled myself up in a blanket for a rest, Noel took an interpreter and went over to him where he sat with his followers in a circle. From where I was I saw the headman pull out two saddle bags for his visitor to sit on. Noel told me afterwards that they were beautifully embroidered, and that the ragged man's courtesy was outstanding.

While I waited, a woolly coated puppy came up to me, still wobbling a little on its legs. I thought it spoke clearly in dog language, saying, "Hello ! Be a sport and come and play !" but then I am a fool over dogs. This one wobbled about, biting its own curly tail. I wondered what kind of dog it would turn into. It had the woolliness of a toy poodle, and would not have looked out of place upon a wooden stand. Its eyes were beady and black. It had huge, unwieldy paws for its size, and was wearing a ruff like Punch's round its neck. It spoke again and said, "I wouldn't at all mind belonging to you !" Such flattery always makes me weak-minded. I was reminded of James Stephens' words, "A young dog is a piece of early morning in an earthly fell, and he who can resist his contagion is a sour, dour, miserable mistake . . . with eyes incapable of seeing the sunlight." I am bad at remembering quotations, but this one stayed in my mind because I so agree. Sultana Malik came up and eyed the puppy with disapproval saying, "Memsahib, he will die in Calcutta." I didn't like Sultana Malik being able to read my thoughts in this way. The black woolly ball had now curled itself up in my lap. "I needn't take him as far as Calcutta," I told Sultana Malik. "I can find him a home in Leh, where he won't have such a hard life as with the nomads. Go and ask them if they will sell him."

"They will, Memsahib. Nomads will sell anything." So would you, you old devil, I thought, hoping his mind-reading operations would reach so far. He went over to the nomads, and returned to say he had paid five

rupees for the dog. Five rupees seemed to be a favourite sum of Sultana Malik's. The dog was mine. I told Noel so when he returned. I said, "You like him, don't you?" The puppy stuck his tongue out of the side of his mouth and smiled.

"How is he going to travel?" Noel asked.

"On my pony." He sat there before me like a woolly cushion, all the rest of the way to Phobrang. We called him, unoriginally, Towzer.

The nomads were a cheery-looking lot of wild men, wearing long robes and three-cornered hats. We met them again in Phobrang that evening. There we changed ponies, and I said good-bye to Punsook. The degree to which I minded saying it was quite unreasonable. I had known him only a relatively short time. While he had dragged my pony I had been unable to talk to him. I didn't really know whether he were a nice boy or a thoroughly bad one. I had smiled in return when his incredibly ugly face had grinned at me, and that was all. Yet, during the trek with him upon the knife edge after the Marsemik, when in that snow-storm I could not see my way, I had depended on him utterly. He had never faltered, but had plodded on resolutely, getting me across the dangerous places. I felt, in spite of being unable to talk to him, that I knew Punsook very well.

There is something frightening about the phrase "Never again", reminding one that the magical moments of life can never be recaptured. It seemed now that never again should I see Chang Chenmo, or know the feeling of its vastness. This wasn't true, but I didn't know it then, and in any case, my return there the following year as, so I felt, an experienced woman traveller who had resisted the call of the gaieties of Simla, belongs to another story. I only mention it now because, after my description of what I regret to say Noel called my "Bloody-mindedness" (yes, he had suffered from it after all) readers may possibly have missed the point that the country has an inordinate power of dragging one back to it, sometimes physically, always in thought.

A consultation over the map had shown us that if we returned to Tankse by the Nomad's valley, as I had suggested doing, our journey would be increased by about fifty miles. We should pass Yaktil, where we had seen the Pangong Lake for the first time, and march for some distance along the southern shore of the lake, reaching a largish village called Shusol. We remembered now that this had been the destination of the grand old Ladakhi lady.

The thought of the Nomad's Valley intrigued, so did that of spending a longer time by the Pangong. We decided to spare the two days extra needed for the journey. At Shusol I obtained a snapshot of the wildest-looking Ladakhi we had seen on the whole trip. He was of fine build, his head well set upon his shoulders. He wore the usual pigtail, but much of his hair escaped it, standing out from his head like a halo in stiff dirty strands. He came forward jauntily to be photographed, undeterred by the camera, a grin upon his grimy face.

We set off up the Nomad's Valley upon a cloudless morning. The air smelt good, and we were both feeling full of energy. I started the journey on foot, my new pony and his driver following me. The valley was perhaps a mile wide, and flanked by immediately high mountains. The track was

rocky and hard going. From Shusol our kit was still carried upon the backs of yaks, which would be changed at Tankse for ponies.

As we climbed higher the sky grew overcast, the air colder, and our early morning feeling of exhilaration left us.

"I think we're for it," said Noel.

I thought so too, and took to my thick coat and burberry over it. Soon I had to ride for lack of breath. The breeze had become a gale.

"Let's hope the resting-place is sheltered," I called.

"It won't be. There's no shelter anywhere in this valley."

I knew that resting places depended less on shelter than on water. We were both riding now, and in silence. I had learnt to try not to be always the first to complain of cold. Soon we reached the highest point of the valley. Towzer sat before me on my saddle, a happy little black ball. I left him in charge of the poneyman and got off to walk so as to bring some life into my frozen feet. The cold grew ever more intense, penetrating all our clothing. This was, I thought, one of the worst days we'd had. I began to feel sick and faint with cold. Such faintness is a dreadful feeling because soon you don't mind about anything very much. Samandu was the only servant with us, Rahim being far behind, probably encouraging the yak drivers with his umbrella.

At last Samandu pointed to a patch of green in the distance.

"The camping ground," he said.

There was no shelter of any kind near it. The melancholy of the valley was all-pervading. "Miles and miles and miles of desolation". It was possible, I thought, that Swinburne's words might hold a certain mournful beauty for old ladies sitting over a lovely fire. They suggested none to me. I felt I could easily have thought of them myself. I got upon my pony again, finding the struggle against the ever-rising gale too much effort. I couldn't feel my feet at all. "This is the stiffest march we've had," said Noel. I was glad he had admitted it first.

When the stage was reached it proved to be a bleak stretch of grass watered by a mountain stream. The only sign of life was two or three brown tents made of homespun, but no living creature was to be seen. The rain beat in pellets of ice against our faces. We could not see our kit, and we knew that in such a gale it would probably be an hour behind us. We stood in the bleak valley, our discomfort and depression growing as the moments passed. I could not speak for the cold. At last Noel called to me: "The only thing to do is to take shelter in one of those nomad's tents."

I could imagine the filth of them, and I thought of lice. Noel saw me hesitating, and called: "Don't be a fool. Come on!"

We approached a tent. Heavy stones held the edges of it fast to the ground, and sheepskins were laid around to keep out wind. I pulled aside the flap and went inside. The tent was small, and filled with smoke smouldering from a fire made of dung and bortsa, over which a woman and four children crouched. There was a hole in the roof through which only a little of the smoke escaped. The children's eyes were red and running from the atmosphere. Only a few rags covered their shivering little bodies. The woman wore the usual peyragh, with but few stones upon it, and her clothing too was

in rags. A child of perhaps eighteen months stood beside her, appearing still to find nourishment at her breast. The other three were thin and starved looking, their heads and faces ingrained with dirt. Their hair stood out stiffly in matted strands. The three of them had pulled a large sheepskin around them, and were huddled beneath it, shivering. I thought, "The cold is bad enough, but this is unbearable."

The woman looked at me apparently without surprise. This seemed strange, until I realized that probably her senses were too numbed for her to be surprised by anything. She was too occupied by the fire which didn't want to burn, and in satisfying the wants of the baby near her breast to have any attention to spare for strangers. I made signs to her, showing that we wanted to share her shelter if we might, and sat down with my back to the wall of the tent. Noel and Samandu had followed me in. The woman apparently hardly noticed them. A board was stretched across the tent on which stood some Tibetan objects wrought in copper and brass.

"What are those?" I asked Samandu.

"They are these people's 'Omni Padme Hum," he answered. I supposed he meant their religious symbols.

"How can they live when they wear so little in this climate?"

"They are strong," he said, "even though they eat little."

"They must be terribly poor."

"No, not so poor. They make money with their sheep and goats, but still they can't get food, because here there *is* no food. They eat mostly dried curds," he said, pointing to a copper tray covered with white lumps. "But they have little grain."

The dirt of the tent was indescribable, yet, although the bare flesh of the children showed in places through their rags, their legs, if thin, were straight, and their teeth were perfect. This was a mystery that I could not understand. I wondered why they had not died long ago from diseases caused by dirt, and why they were not rickety. I thought the answer must be that they lived on milk. I wondered how their mother still managed to produce milk from her breast to feed the baby. The faces of the children were drawn and terribly old-looking, yet I felt they might be fundamentally healthier than many in a London slum. I tried to believe this, for the sight of them was painful.

Another human being crawled into the tent. Taking no notice of us he sat down on his hunkers against the wall. His gown was not ragged, but made of good hand-woven cloth. I commented on its quality to Samandu, who said that the men's clothes were mostly woven by women in the villages, adding: "This is one of the 'bibi's'* husbands. He who goes upon the hill must have the thickest clothing." The woman picked up a lump of curd from the copper tray and threw it at the man. He grabbed it and began to eat. This was the first sign she had given of noticing his arrival. He did not speak. This was evidently a family where first things came first.

"Ask her if she has many husbands," I said.

Samandu interpreted my question. "Three," he answered. "The other two are out with the sheep on the hill."

* Woman's.

So seven human beings depended for their nourishment and well-being (if one could call it that) upon this one woman. It was she alone who kept life in her family, life in the raw though it might be. Whatever else hse might suffer from it would not be the feeling that she had too little responsibility. Her primitive instincts at least would never be frustrated.

The yaks and kit had arrived. We gave the nomad woman some money which brought a smile to her face. We left the tent to fight our way through the storm to our own, which was now being pitched. I couldn't forget the sight of those children's faces or imagine them ever laughing or playing.

"Don't get a depression about it," said Noel with man-like practicality. "Forget it."

I couldn't. Yet later, rolled up in blankets and drinking a steaming cup of tea, I wondered whether in spite of hardship and illiteracy these Ladakhi women might not be more normal specimens of their sex than many living in England where there was a superfluity of females. Here it was a vital need of the country that every woman should perform her natural functions, bearing children and caring for the welfare of men. In England this was denied to many women, with the result that vociferous, frustrated females abounded, screaming for "equality" with men; agitating for financial compensation should the gamble of marriage go against them.

By morning the sun was shining and the valley was calm. We breakfasted outside our tent with a feeling of well-being. Today the valley was a sun-baked harbourage. The nomad women had emerged from their tents. They gathered in a group quite close to us, laughing and talking. Our hostess of the night before seemed to have a long story to tell. With their heads together, apparently happy, she and her friends might have been any group of village gossips. The previous night I had thought they could not be far from an animal state, but the morning sunlight had changed all that. The children were running and jumping across the little streams winding in the valley. They looked just like other children. The weather, it seemed, had changed everything.

I would like to have spent the day in that wide valley, looking at the mountains, but Noel did not want to risk another evening storm. Time was getting short, and we couldn't risk being held up. In any case, at the first suspicion of winter snows we must be out of Tibet and Ladakh.

CHAPTER SIX

IT WILL PERHAPS BE REMEMBERED THAT FOR MY HUSBAND THE MAIN OBJECT of this trip had been to shoot an ovis ammon, the immense sheep to be found only in the higher ranges of the Himalayas. The pursuit of it would lead us back to Sakti, after which we would cross the Indus, marching via two villages called Ugu and Upshi, and eventually arriving near Noel's shooting block at a village called Gya. According to the map, this seemed a comparatively large place, one which might have as many as fifty inhabitants.

The place is one of the recognized stages on the Leh-Kulu trade route. To reach it some of our way would be by the track we had already followed. This time Noel meant to halt for a night at Tankse to see if the Customs officer's report of burrhel in the district had any foundation.

I was grateful for a rest in the round basin of Tankse. The "bagh" where our tents were pitched was filled with the strong, minty scent belonging to Ladakh that it is so hard to forget. On the morning after our arrival I settled myself outside the tent in a roorkhee chair with Towzer playing around me. He was beginning to consider himself a fine dog and was barking fiercely, his curly tail well up, at an old woman in an adjacent field.

It is ten o'clock. The rays of the sun are hot. The camp servants are chopping wood. It is almost as pleasant a sound as that of a lawn-mower in England. I have eaten a huge breakfast, and now a friendly bird is making advances to me for crumbs. I have a curious consciousness of happiness.

A ragged urchin advances shyly. He smiles and says, "Salaam". He looks as though he might be hopeful of backsheesh. I wish I had some to give him, but our money is locked up, and Noel has the key with him on the hill. It is lovely to be resting, even though I know I ought to take the chance of washing some of our now ragged clothes. The trousers of Noel's shooting suit that suffered so in Chang Chenmo are still waiting to be mended. They are in a far worse state now, but he has two pairs, so never mind. How good my bath was this morning in the canvas tub with the hot rays of the sun penetrating the tent! Another child comes into the 'bagh'. He is quite a baby. His little legs are bare up to his groins, and a few rags hang from his shoulders. He looks at the strange white woman in a puzzled way. I call him. Though he can't understand my speech, he comes still closer. I show him my watch. Like any other baby, he listens intently to its ticking.

Here comes Rahim with a rueful face. By its neck he holds the last of the chickens that were brought alive from Leh. Rahim is a great manager. He won't let us have everything all at once. The chicken, having travelled over two passes to Chang Chenmo and back to here, is not much of a bird. I think this a little funny, but Rahim does not. "What," he asks, "will the Sahib log eat?"

I haven't an idea. The Sahib-log will be all right, I tell him, and I wish he wouldn't bother. I get up from my chair and fetch a blanket, lie upon the ground and go to sleep.

That evening we met our first Europeans for several weeks.

"A sahib comes," said Rahim, full of excitement, "and a memsahib."

Until you have travelled in far-off, lonely places you can't know the thrill of such news. What were they doing? Why were they here? Had they gone as far as we? No—or we must have met them. Above all, who were they?

Noel had not returned from the hill when I saw their caravan turn in at the bagh. A tall man led the way and behind him came a dark swarthy-skinned woman. Few ponies accompanied them, and I saw no sign of any heads. Perhaps they were not in this country to shoot. I went over to them and we introduced ourselves. The man was "Ganpat", the novelist, and the woman with him was Mlle La Fougie, a French artist to whom he had acted

as courier over the Chang La. I was struck at once by the force of her charming personality. She had started from Srinagar alone in search of material for paintings of Ladakh. She had, I gathered, found some difficulty in obtaining a permit, for these are seldom granted by the Kashmir Government to lone women travellers. But I could imagine that if Mlle La Fougie were determined upon a course, it would take more than a British resident, apprehensive perhaps as to her safety, to stop her pursuing it. She was travelling very light and looked physically as hard as nails. She was not going farther than Tankse, where she wanted to sketch the interior of some Ladakhi houses. When Noel arrived she was entranced with his bearded appearance and exclaimed, "Mais, c'est St. Jean le Baptiste!" That night we opened a precious tin of fruit, Rahim cooked the attenuated hen, and we had a party.

The French woman showed me sketches she had already made of Ladakhi interiors. There was the lady of the house in state with her children beside her, while in a corner of the room were her three husbands, sitting close together with a good-boy look upon their faces. The woman quite obviously was queen of her surroundings.

The sketches led to a discussion between Mlle La Fougie and myself on the evergreen subject of our sex. She was no feminist as the word is understood in England.

"You English," she said, "if your 'usband like only for one night someone better than you, you 'urry to divorce. You break up your family like that!" She snapped her fingers. "It is stupid. In France we know that such a little thing happens to any man, but then our women have, I think, more intelligence in marriage."

I hope I am always willing to learn. "What do they do?" I asked.

"They suffer," she said laconically, "and they do nothing—but they keep their 'omes. You 'ave a proverb about cutting off your noses to make angry your faces, 'aven't you? But you do not, it seems, often remember it!"

Oh well . . .

'Ganpat', who had often been to this country, told me that when Towzer was fully grown he would be larger than an Airedale, and probably ferocious enough to land his owner in any civilized country in the police court. As he was becoming better fed, he was already showing signs of this. It was another reason for not taking him to Calcutta. I felt it would be tiresome if he took a dislike to a Bengali wearing a dhoti and showing his sock suspenders. A dog of his calibre very well might.

The next day we parted from our friends and left for Durgu, where Noel meant to try again for burrhel, not having had any luck at Tankse. Here, too, he drew blank, and we went on to our stage before the Chang La for the night. Towzer now said he was big enough to walk, and fidgeted so much on my pony that I let him.

This time there was little snow upon the pass, and a wonderful view from the summit which we had missed on our outward journey on account of cloud. We suffered less from sickness, although the sudden drop to Sakti left us deaf for a short time. By now it was August 3rd, and therefore midsummer in Ladakh.

From Sakti we would again explore new country on our way to the ammon block. I found myself well hardened by Chang Chenmo, and our present altitude of 13,000 feet had no effect on me at all. I could walk again, which was a blessing.

All too soon we reached the Indus, which of course meant a stretch of slogging through sand, beneath blazing sun and between rocks that radiated heat, with nothing growing, and muddy-looking water beside us. We halted for lunch at a village about the name of which the map, guide-book and ponymen all differed. We were grateful for the shade its few trees gave. Here we were twelve miles from Sakti and had another six to march to reach Upshi, our stage for the night.

Soon after leaving the anonymous village we had to cross the river by a rickety-looking bridge with no sides to it. Towzer was taken down a peg, for he was terrified and had to be carried over. Our path now led downhill, and in the blazing sun he suffered rather badly in his thick coat. "No Calcutta for you, my lad," I told him.

Upshi is an attractive village right on the banks of the Indus. From it, away to the right, runs a narrow gorge which is the main road to Kulu and Simla. Up this gorge was also the way to our next halting-place. The villagers told us that in parts this road was very bad, and we certainly met with difficulties at a place where some twenty-five yards of the otherwise well built up pathway had practically disappeared. This meant a rather hair-raising scramble over a knife-edge where the soil was a curious blood red. The gorge was immensely deep, and twisted continually, offering always new and amazing vistas of huge rocky formations. Water came tearing down its bed, green and foam-splashed between fields of mustard, their fierce yellow an amazing contrast with the curious lilac-shaded earth of the cliffs.

We were now climbing steadily high above the torrent. Of all our marches this one—together with that which in my own mind I called the "Valley of the wind", where we heard the mighty symphony—stands out as the most remarkable for grandeur of scenery. As we came still higher nature had run riot, splashing purple, green, blue, yellow and crimson on to the cliff sides. The colouring intoxicated with its luxuriance. I know only too well that I cannot hope to describe it even adequately. The gorge was so narrow that we could have thrown a stone across it. Sometimes it seemed as though it must close in upon us, crushing us poor atoms between its rocky sides.

At last it widened. The hills became smoother and less rocky, and we emerged on to a rolling stony plateau stretching away gently to snow-fields far beyond.

The next day brought a monotonous march of twelve miles up a wide valley until we were again at 15,000 feet. Then in the distance we saw the village of Gya, our furthest point in this direction, and where we should stay until Noel got his ammon. I had never before seen so many chortens, piles of stones or mani walls as here. Perhaps the number was an indication of the gratitude of those devout travellers who had safely crossed the uninhabited and barren regions beyond, for Gya is the last inhabited place to be met with on this route. Beyond it the only sign of human life would be the tents of Tartar nomads.

Here there were terraces of fields, but no shade. During the day the heat was intense, yet a moment after sunset we had to wrap ourselves in all our clothing to keep warm.

Ammon. Our camp followers spoke of little else, for to acquire a head of these great sheep is the blue ribbon of sport in the higher Himalayan ranges. A full grown ammon stands about twelve hands. The general colour of its coat, which is short, soft and close, is a light brownish grey growing darker about the withers. In autumn it becomes darker all over and more glossy. Under the chest and belly the pelt is almost white. An ammon's legs are lanky and slight for its body. It has hardly any tail. The massive, deeply creased horns are well arched upwards and backwards, their points curling round towards the cheeks. The length of horn never looks as long as it is when measured. In weight these horns are only exceeded by the ovis poli which inhabits the Pamir steppes and northern parts of Turkestan. Although the horns of the ovis poli are not so thick, they are much larger, having more curl and a wider spread. Still, an ordinary head of ovis ammon, one not measuring more than forty inches, weighs quite forty pounds.

During the rutting season the rams indulge in hearty battles with each other, which accounts for many fine heads being spoiled by broken tips.

On the first morning of his search for these great sheep, Noel went out at 6 a.m. Soon afterwards I induced a cooli to ask a village man if he would let me see the interior of his house. I hoped this was not impertinent, but for a long time I had felt curiosity about the box-like houses we had seen, with their windows only on the top story. The reason for this being of course obvious when one thinks of winter snows.

Soon an old man came, saying he would be pleased if I would follow him. His house was bare; the rooms on the ground floor dark and bitterly cold, but the stone building seemed strong enough to resist any weather. Upstairs in a room bare of furniture I met several wrinkled old women, and a girl of perhaps fifteen, with a pleasant, dirty face. She pretended to cry with shyness at the sight of a stranger, until by chance I put my hand in my pocket for a handkerchief, when she cheered up miraculously. I gathered from the air of general expectancy that one of the women had suggested a possibility of backsheesh. So far has the Kashmiri infection penetrated. I was disappointed at not having seen a much married younger woman in her own domain and went back to the camp.

Noel had not expected to find ammon on his first day. They are difficult animals to approach, winding humans quickly and having considerable intelligence. But soon I heard several shots from the hill. The number suggested a miss, and if this were so, we might still find ourselves at Gya three weeks hence, if we were foolish enough to hope that a frightened herd of ammon would return. However, Noel had been lucky, having come upon a herd of nine, six of them rams. He killed the first he shot at.

(*Extract from his diary.*)

"As the ammon is a large and strong animal I decided to use my 470 D.B. rifle instead of the little 256 Männlicher which had always been my favourite. Having looked it well over, I, Sultana Malik, Samandu and a

cooli set out for the hill immediately opposite the camp. Our first spy was ineffective except for the large number of kyams that infested the place. I was also surprised at the number of hares that went hopping up the hill before us. After our first stop we pushed on higher still over easy going for a few hundred feet, and from here we could see right into the upper end of the nullah in which, on the previous evening, the animals had been reported to be. I don't know who saw them first, Sultana Malik or I, but it was a close thing. Anyhow, there about half a mile above us, and in an apparently unassailable position, were nine ovis ammon, presumably the herd I had been told of, and so far as we could see at that distance, there were at least two or three shootable heads among them.

"The first thing to do was to study their position, and the approaches to it from a much nearer point, so we took a long, left-handed 'chukkar' away from the spot on the spur where we had first seen them, intending to come up again on to the crest a few hundred yards nearer for another look. Whilst climbing over the smooth, shaley slope, I saw the complete skeleton of an animal lying away to my left. I went over to it, and found it to be the remains of an ammon, with a head about 44 inches long, without allowing for badly broken tips. Evidently there had been good ammon in the block at some time, and even if the wild dogs had got this one, I decided to have it collected and take it back with me.

"On arrival at the place decided on for our next spy, we found that our previous assumptions were correct; firstly that the animals were in a difficult position to approach, for they commanded all the ground to each flank as well as below them for about 500 yards, and secondly that there was no cover above them for 200 yards. Also, the wind, although blowing up the nullah from the east towards them, was decidedly tricky. If it shifted more to the north it would give us away unless we moved quickly. But—among the nine animals we saw, three were definitely sizable heads. Of these three one stood out as having a really heavy horn, but he had lost a considerable amount more from one tip than from the other in the continuous scrapping that these fine old rams seem to enjoy.

"However, action had to be taken, and there being practically no alternative, we decided on one more chukkar away from the crest and back again to a point which we hoped would be above them and partially concealed. We would have to crawl down from above, making use of whatever cover there was, and chance it. We had not very far to go this time, and when we reached our objective we found ourselves about 500 yards above them, and for the moment concealed from their view. They were at the bottom of a steep slope.

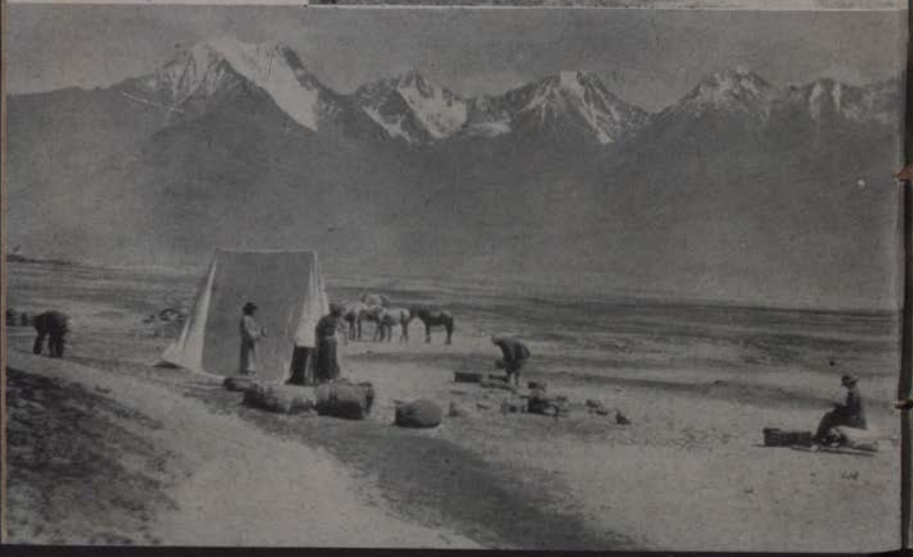
"Now began the complete destruction of my shooting clothes. I wormed my way for 150 yards on my knees and stomach, panting and blowing, and endeavouring from time to time to check the impetuous rush of Sultana Malik who insisted upon going too fast before me, whispering, 'They won't stay there long!' (He was about one-third of my size, and could move more easily.) However I had fixed a point in my eye from which I felt I must take my shot, and was determined to reach it as little out of breath as possible.

NOMADS (RIGHT) TOGETHER WITH PUNSOOK, YAK DRIVER, AND SAMANDU

COOLI CARRIERS

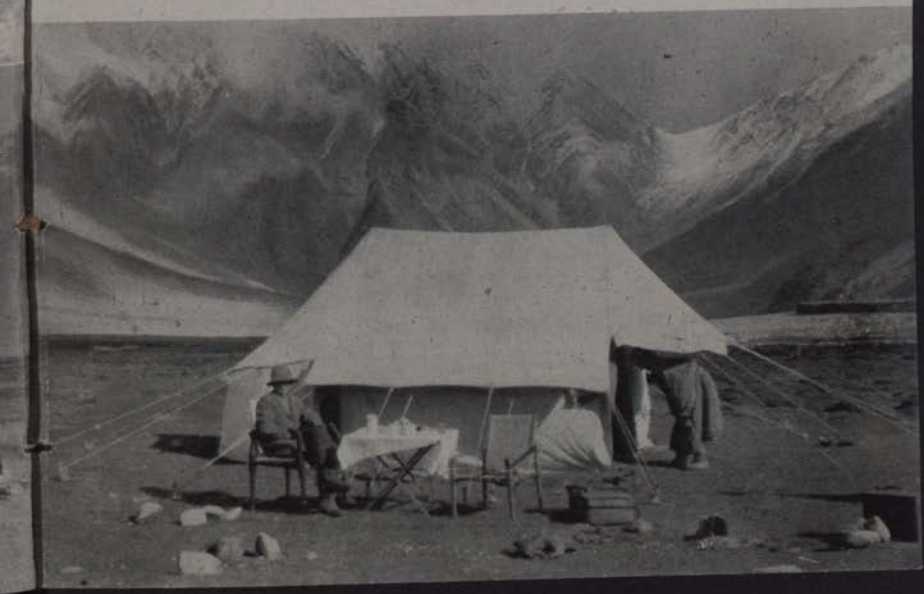
"THE WILDEST LADAKHI . . ."

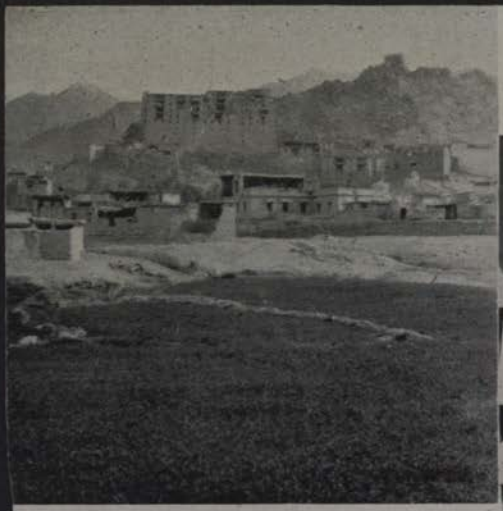
THE NOMADS' VALLEY



NOMAD WOMEN AND CHILDREN

BREAKFAST IN THE NOMADS' VALLEY





LEH

SULTANA MALIK WITH HEAD OF OVIS AMMON

RAHIM (CENTRE) WITH CAMP COOLIS

Throughout most of these 150 yards, by raising myself on to my hands and knees, I could see all nine animals, while from a prone position I could just see the two furthest away who were looking down the nullah and busy eating. I knew I might have to get on to my feet and take a running shot at any moment, but I hoped to get within the 200 mark first. We had done about 250 yards, and now we stopped for breath. By raising ourselves we could see the three nearest very clearly, and among them was the fine head with the broken tip. A few more yards and Sultana Malik said, 'We can go no further without their seeing us.' I decided to concentrate on number one, who had a good head practically complete, and number two of the broken tip, for apart from this he carried a very fine head with heavy horns curling well forward. I slowly raised myself to a sitting position, took a steady rest on both knees, allowed a few seconds for Sultana Malik to fix number one with his glasses, and for me to draw a steady breath (height about 16,500) and let drive at him.

"No doubt about a hit from the thud of the bullet striking, but apparently the ammon is none the worse. Up go the heads of all the others as he moves slowly forward and I give him the left barrel. Another hit, for he stumbles badly, staggers a few yards and goes down.

"Now for number two. After reloading I had only time for one shot at about 250 yards before he has quickened his pace to a trot and joined the startled herd who are all in headlong gallop down the nullah. Following Sultana Malik's information as to his position, sometimes last, sometimes last but one, now on the right, now on the left, I manage to get six more shots at him before he has covered the remaining 600 yards between him and the next nullah. Sultana Malik is exultant.

"Whether he was hit from my first or subsequent shots I cannot say, but when examining his tracks we found blood-stains. We went straight down to number one and found him to be hit in the stomach. What a magnificent head this great sheep has, and what a powerful neck carries it!

"On measuring, I was quite disappointed to find the tape did not make it more than 40 inches, but one's first ammon, even if it is one's only ammon, is one of the great events of a lifetime. I was in no mood to grumble.

"We left a cooli beside the body and set off along the track followed by the others. On it we found blood every ten yards or so, and we followed them over the next ridge and into the adjoining nullah to the south where we had last seen the fugitives disappear. Here on the crest we waited for the ponymen who, attracted by the sound of firing, had left camp and were hurrying up to the first ammon in expectation of a good meal on raw flesh, which is something they appreciate. It was four o'clock in the afternoon before I could collect the two best trackers, with sufficient rations for two days, and lay them on the blood trail with orders to follow it up until they found the animal. Then one of them was to return and lead me to the spot. I then made all necessary preparations for moving camp in that direction the following morning."

On Noel's return to camp that evening everyone was wildly excited. Such amazing luck on a first day out was, they said, unheard of. Sultana

Malik produced an English pipe and smoked it, remarking that he could now face the population of his native village with equanimity. He shook hands with me, and with Noel. He patted Rahim on the back, a gesture that was little appreciated, congratulating him on the fact that he so often had illuminating visions on the subject of shikar, and that this one had come true.

I had thought Ladakhis pleasant people. I still think so, but at the time my view of them became a little biased. The ponymen who had been sent out to fetch back the dead ammon were a long time in returning. When at last they came, they carried it in pieces as it is too large an animal to carry whole. They had only too obviously enjoyed the dissection of its body, for their faces and clothing were covered in blood. Blood-stained clothing was to be expected, but their faces showed that they had devoured the entrails of the animal. With them was a woman whose face was bloodiest of all. Knowledgeable readers may well say, "But Buddhists do not eat animal flesh!" All I can answer is that these Buddhists did. The sight of them was not pretty. Waves of sickness rose in me, and I took myself away.

That night we stayed where we were while waiting for news of the other wounded ammon. Noel went out in the morning again to look for burrhel. I stayed alone in camp. It was cloudy-looking down the valley. The wind blew cold and sunshine was intermittent. The ground around me was carpeted with tiny and exquisite alpine plants. It might help to give this record an air if I could name some varieties, but unfortunately I am not a botanist and am singularly unversed in the Latin names of plants.

Time was moving on towards our return to Srinagar and the ordinary world. Once the wounded ammon was trailed and found, we should set our faces towards Leh, spend a few days there perhaps, and then make for the nullah in Kashmir, where Noel hoped to find his final trophy, the huge Kashmiri stag. Now quite suddenly I realized that I was tired. I seemed to have become very thin, and I wondered what I weighed. I was tired, too, of no colour in my clothes, and of looking like a boy. I wanted to wear a skirt again. Quite ordinary things suddenly took on great value; a comfortable bed—not something I had to give up to form a table every time Noel wanted a place to spread a map—a looking-glass in which I could see the whole of the worst or the best of myself, and warm feet. At that moment such requirements seemed all I should ever ask for again. If all this sounds lamentable weakness in the face of the grandeur of scenery with which I was surrounded, I can only say again that I do not pretend to be a woman devoid of weakness.

I thought of food. Food for which one would feel really hungry. I chose in my mind the perfect dinner. I thought of wild duck and a water ice. I was deadly sick of mutton, and my effort on the previous evening to eat what the coolis had left of the ammon's liver had not met with success. Still, tonight, we were opening a precious tin of herrings. I looked forward to that.

The day wore on. Noel was still away. It grew darker in the valley. A bitter wind was rising. It was becoming dark earlier in the evenings now. Over the mountains hung an atmosphere of heavy melancholy. It was strange to think of the lives lived by the people in this village who would go

to ground like animals during the many winter months. I cursed the bar of language which prevented me from knowing their thoughts. Here beneath the shadow of the ever darkening mountains one saw human life as a short-spanned feeble thing. The deepening melancholy of the place was insidious. It crept upon one until it alone seemed the ultimate reality. It was arresting and it gripped. I tried to drag away my thoughts to Home where the unimportance of life was not so manifest. I thought of approaching autumn; of wood fires and the earthy smell of chrysanthemums, of the salt mist blown towards me from the English Channel—of a table laid with an English tea. A terrible hunger assailed me for ordinary English things. The lights of London, and the warmth and laughter in friend's homes. Nothing in Calcutta—not all the garden parties at Government House—neither the dances nor the paper chases, nor the everlasting round of dressed-up gaiety could compensate for them. You get this feeling sometimes in the East. It is a desperate, dire want of Home. Yet as soon as you cease to know it, you should recognize a danger signal pointing to the fact that you are afraid to go back to England. There are people who have become afraid. They are afraid of a dearth of fun, of discomfort owing to the shortage of domestic servants, of poverty. "Here," such people say, "you get value for your money!" But do you? When, in up-country stations, you find yourself spending every evening at the club because there is nothing else to do—with nothing inside yourself any more to keep you in your bungalow. There you sit round little tables, drinking and eating "gram" or fried potato chips called "aloes" as you discuss the latest scandal. People come and sink down exhaustedly in a chair beside you. They never tell you anything new, nor have you anything new to say to them, because both of you know exactly what the other must have done that day, and the day before, and the day before that. You chatter though, and as the weeks and months pass your chatter becomes more meaningless. You give a party, and it's all rather pretentious—yours and other people's parties. I once knew a hostess in a small up-country station who used to inscribe either "Tails" or "short coat" upon her dinner invitations. Think of that now! If such a thing does not make you rebellious there is no hope for you any more. At such parties people sit according to precedence, even in a small up-country station. It seems an incredible thought that every attempt at congeniality must be so deliberately frustrated.

In India, many Europeans feel, if the truth be spoken, just a little more important than at home. Why? Because socially each is a large frog in a tiny puddle made by all for all to croak in. There have been some who, after years, have escaped this soul destruction, but only few.

Yet—despite all this there is the India of the plains and of the jungles. There is the cry of the sweetseller on station platforms and of the Mahommedan calling to prayer. Such things are real. There is much to see and learn, but few Britishers see and learn it. Despite my grievances about enforced social activities, I knew I should always be thankful I had known India, and besides, my stay there had given me the chance to see Ladakh.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE NEXT MORNING NOEL MOVED OFF EARLY WITH SULTANA MALIK, HOPING to get in touch with the trackers. In his diary he says:

"I stayed out till 6 p.m., climbing well above the snow-line from where I had the most marvellous view of the highest peaks in the Karakorum. I saw no sign of the trackers and returned somewhat disconsolately to camp. Shortly after nine o'clock however, two very tired coolis limped into camp carrying heavy burdens, one a large sack of gruesome lumps of flesh, the other the head of number two, complete except for his broken horn. To my intense delight he measured 47 inches—a really fine head. To make it better, his skin was in no way damaged except around one eye where vultures had attacked him. When found in a small water course he had apparently been dead for some hours, as the result of the cold water reaching his wounded intestines, the bullet having hit him far back and low. So many stories are told of so-called wounded beasts whose heads are subsequently brought in by shikaris, having been dug up from a place where they have been kept in pickle, that I was glad to be sure this ammon was my own. A sign of this was that the meat was fresh and bloody. This, together with the broken horn, was unmistakable evidence, and corroboration of the blood-stained track which I had followed myself for a great distance."

That head, too, went into Roland Ward's book.

Noel had now shot the permissible limit of two heads. I was astounded by their weight. The two, together with the one that was found upon the ground, made an imposing sight upon the back of a yak.

There still remained burrhel and sharpu. We set off towards Leh as quickly as possible.

The only event of any interest on the way was that we fell in with a caravan of traders on their way from Lhassa to Kashmir. A miserable-looking chestnut puppy was struggling along with them, and although it may seem incredible that I could be so foolish, again I fell, and landed myself with another dog. I had made up my mind to leave Towzer in Leh, but "Ginger" was too small to be left anywhere, and far too small to be staggering along, thin and uncared for in the way he had travelled up to now. I *would* take him to Calcutta. I would shave him like a poodle if need be. I did all this, but I didn't know, even then, just how attached I should become to him, or how I should treasure this nomad from Central Asia as my constant companion throughout the rest of our time in India, only to lose him of rabies at Hackbridge two days after my arrival in England. He had weathered Calcutta, he had lived with us in Meerut, where he had grown to a huge size suggesting a cross between a chow and a pomeranian (the last only in shape), and during the voyage Home he had received many admiring visitors on the poop deck, and then—a telephone call for me in a London hotel, "Your dog has gone mad . . ." *No*—it's only because he is not used to captivity, and has never been away from me. . . .

"I'm sorry, madam. The brain will of course be examined after he has been destroyed."

The diagnosis read, "Rabies".

We arrived in Leh two days later to find a copious mail which took much answering. Among my own there was a long box with the name of a London shop upon it. I wondered what in heaven's name it held, but when I opened my letters, one of them told me. It was from a woman friend in England. I had quite forgotten that I had asked her to buy me an evening dress. That it should have been carried all the way from Srinagar by cooli to await us in Leh, and that it would return with us, piled up with pots and pans and yakdans on a pony's back, struck me as both tiresome and funny. My friend had written, *You must be crazy going off into the blue like that. I can't think of any greater hell, but then—you have always done the oddest things.* . . . Then she told me of the purchase of the evening dress. There it was in its box. The sensible thing to do was to leave it there, broken though the sides of the box were; not to do what I knew I had every intention of doing, unpack it, try it on, and let it trail upon the dirty floor of the dak bungalow. Noel was out, and I had the place to myself. There was a cracked mirror in the room standing on a table that we used for eating. I pulled off my breeches and shirt and tried on the dress. In it, with my appearance at its present stage of part wornness, I felt I might have had some success as a music hall turn. The dress was made of gold lamé, and had a little train. It was eminently suitable for a vice-regal party. My dressmaker at home had my measurements, but I seemed now to be a long way inside the dress. It fell off my shoulders. Unless I put on some flesh before I wore it, there was likely to be a nasty accident. Trekking to uninhabited regions is all very well, but it plays the devil with one's appearance. I can hear hardened women travellers snort. I don't mind their snorts. I see no need to become unsexed by travel, and in any case I find those women boring who enjoy deliberate plainness. Noel came in during my posturing, and laughed at me !"

Since our last visit to the town, Leh had become the vortex of Central Asian society. Caravans were in. The streets were filled with crowds of people of different nationalities. Yarkandis in their high Russian boots, Tibetans with their long pigtails, red-bearded Mahomedans followed by their "house" (which means their wives) all jostled one another. The Mahomedan wives were veiled in white from head to foot. The British Joint Commissioner was still in residence, and tonight there was to be a "tamasha" in the gardens of his house to which everyone in the town was invited. There would be devil-dancing and play-acting; Russian dancing too, by some Yarkandis. It promised to be a good party.

The duties of the British Joint Commissioner were fairly onerous, I found. Some people at home seem to think such men just sit in splendour in their residences. It is not so. I had learnt something of their duties in connection with the trade of Ladakh with China and Tibet. I was beginning to understand the importance of Leh as a great emporium. During our first visit we had heard much talk of caravans. The whole life of the town seemed to hang upon their arrival. To me, they had at first suggested merely a glamorous procession such as might appear upon the stage at Drury Lane

during a performance of a scene from *The Arabian Nights*. The word caravan did not seem to belong to a modern world where trade between countries was negotiated by sea and rail. I had underestimated the importance of Leh. The town was far from being a holiday centre that catered for the amusement of summer visitors. The caravan trade was serious, and the real significance of it was soon brought home to me.

Under a commercial treaty concluded many years ago with a Majarajah of Kashmir, a British Commissioner is deputed to Ladakh to regulate both trade and traffic, together with an official appointed by the Kashmir State. Both are Joint Commissioners of Ladakh. The duties of the Kashmir official are to attend to the interior administration of the province, whereas the responsibility of the trade routes devolves upon the British Joint Commissioner. Hence his presence in Leh at the moment. He resides in the town only during the trading season of the year, returning to India just before the passes are closed by snow. He is a vital link between Britain and Central Asia, for the pressure of foreign competition upon British commerce can be felt even in this far-off land.

The trade between Western Tibet and Chinese Turkestan is brought from Lhassa, Kutan, Kashgar and Yarkand in time to meet the Indian caravans which start in the summer from the Punjab, carrying cotton goods, tea and other merchandize. In Leh, the Russian-booted Yarkandis, and merchants from China offer for barter and sale their gold, silver and carpets, exchanging them for the goods of the Indian traders. After a short stay in the town these strangers depart towards the four points of the compass before their various routes are closed by snow. It seemed an odd method of doing business. One that carried you back in imagination to Biblical times, but one that is unlikely to change for many years, for changes happen slowly in the East.

It struck me as strange that no elaborate jurisdiction seemed necessary to control the crowds of merchants in the town, but I was told that trade disputes seldom took place, and that when they did, they were settled quickly and fairly easily by arbitration in the Serais. It seemed there was a lesson to be learnt from this Eastern league of nations.

No caravan could get far upon its route without a passport from the British Joint Commissioner, and obviously in this way a certain control was levied.

The trade routes are maintained entirely at the expense of the Kashmir State, which pays some thousands of rupees yearly to the Joint Commissioners for the upkeep of the road. The distance from the Zogi Pass to the Karakorum is over 300 miles; that from Leh to the Tibetan frontier over 100. Therefore even the sum allotted would be inadequate for the upkeep of roads of such length were it not for the help given by the people of the country. At a summons from the British Joint Commissioner, Ladakhis, dependent as they are for much of their livelihood upon the traffic of the country, will assemble at once and work unceasingly to repair a broken bridge, or a fallen piece of road, so long—and this seemed an important factor—as the Commissioner himself is present, accepting without question whatever payment he sees fit to give them. It sounded simple, but then, labour troubles have not yet reached Ladakh.

Of the disasters that can happen to the trade routes, I have learnt much from reading old books and reports. There was once a year still called the "Flood year", when, in spite of the fact that Ladakh is usually considered a rainless tract, a steady rain began near the Zogi in June, working havoc among the roads and bridges. The Indus rose in flood, and communications between Srinagar and Leh were completely cut off. The bridge leading to the old fort at Khargil was destroyed, and it stands at a distance of 120 miles from the nearest town!

The British Joint Commissioner, who was officiating at that time, took action on his own responsibility and with very little help. Villagers were collected to fell the tall poplars near the fort, and prepare planks for use until supplies arrived from Kashmir. The river could not be crossed, and therefore workers on either side of it could not communicate with one another. Those who had attempted to cross it had been drowned. No boat or raft could hope to live upon the waters. The story goes that when the necessity arose from the far side to summon a road official from Leh, a Ladakhi who possessed a bow and arrow saved the situation. The orders were affixed to a shaft which carried the message across the river. Further trouble came the same year when the Shyok river flooded, as it has done since. Rafts had been wrecked, and caravans from Yarkand were blocked in the Nubra Valley. Trade for that year seemed to be at a standstill. Yet—within two months this broken mountain road of 200 miles, crossing three large rivers and three high passes, was—by the British Joint Commissioner, a handful of British officers disappointed in their shooting trips, together with the natives of the locality—put in a condition to carry the Central Asian trade, and was in order from end to end. This happened in 1894 and seems a good illustration of the work of Empire builders of the time.

I cannot remember ever feeling such contentment of spirit as I felt in Leh during those August days. I had taken on our journey light-heartedly, but somehow I had achieved it. Perhaps this sounds as though I were inordinately pleased with myself, but I don't think it was altogether that. It was rather that, almost in spite of myself and my own weaknesses, I had learnt the fatal error one makes when one allows oneself to live under the frustrating law "I can't". That way, surely, lies attrition, leading so inevitably away from that garden, so full of enchantment, into which the fearful may not enter. I had, for the first time, found this out. Ladakh had taught me much; Chang Chenmo still more. I knew now that although one cannot hope to change the fundamentals of one's nature it is possible to develop in spite of them. To have been extended until one is using every power one has—to have been even for a short time so extended—is to have acquired a certain power over one's body that can prove for ever more a source of strength to draw on.

After tea we walked over to the Residency. A grassy space in the grounds had been roped off as an arena, and in the centre a huge bonfire burnt, built up of thick logs stacked to a great height. Kerosene was from time to time poured upon the blaze to ensure its giving sufficient light (for darkness was falling swiftly) by Ladakhi men who stood with torches in their hands at the corners of the arena. At one end upon a dais were chairs to accommodate

the higher Ladakhi officials and friends of the Commissioner. Next to me, upon a throne-like richly upholstered chair, sat a little boy of ten years old. With some feeling of awe I realized that he was the Skushog, or living Buddha. These living Buddhas are believed to be the spiritual sons of Celestial Beings. In order to help mankind upon the road to Nirvana, they voluntarily remain outside the happy state themselves as once having passed in it is impossible for them to reappear on earth. So, owing to their compassion for mankind, these Celestial Beings produce spiritual sons so that through them a chance may be given to humanity to escape from the terrors of being subjected to recurrent transmigrations.

The Skushog was a very small figure dressed in beautiful yellow robes. Standing behind him were two Lamas. The Commissioner told me afterwards that they had been his nurses. The child's face was a perfect oval, pale as the skin of a banana, finely featured and exquisite. He showed little sign of childishness. Later the Commissioner told me the story which had rendered unnecessary a search by the Lamas for an infant who, being born at the moment of the departing Skushog's death, was the recipient of his spirit.

On this occasion, before his death the old Skushog had indicated that a child would be born to a woman in a far-off mountain village at the moment when he died, and that no further search need be made, for the boy would be the living Buddha. The village was visited and the pregnant woman found. The birth of the child coincided with the death of the old Lama almost to the minute. Sceptics may not believe it, but that is the story. The baby was taken to the monastery at Leh, where he was brought up by the two Lama "nurses".

This indeed seemed one of the greater Mysteries. The mother of the boy had been a typical Ladakhi woman, high cheek-boned and Mongolian in appearance. No Ladakhi woman, according to European standards, is a beauty, but this child was so beautiful that I could hardly tear my eyes away from his face. He seemed oblivious of his surroundings, and looked steadfastly to his front. Widely set eyes burnt blackly between exquisitely arched brows, which seemed too perfectly pencilled to be natural. He was like a small, superlatively modelled image. The Commissioner told me that a few days ago he had paid an official visit to the little Skushog in his monastery, when his manners and bearing had been those of an adult and erudite man. When he was twelve he would go to Lhassa for twelve years' solitary learning and meditation. Then he would return to Leh.

A dog was playing in front of us, and now for the first time the child gave a sign that he was human. He smiled at its antics, only to become image-like again as a passing Lama knelt before him for his blessing, which he gave by stretching out his hand, and laying it for a moment on the old man's head.

The performance was about to begin. I was impatient to see this devil-dancing, or, as it is more often called, masquerade dancing, by the priests. Many travellers make pilgrimages to the rich monastery at Hemis to see the yearly masque. There, the dresses, which are utterly grotesque, are all brought from Lhassa. The origin of the pantomime is unknown, but it is of a great age, dating from times before the introduction of Buddhism, to

which it has little affinity. What we should see in the garden of the Commissioner would be a minor display, but still, I felt, one of the experiences of a lifetime.

There was a feeling of expectancy among the colourful audience crowded around the arena. A silence fell. Then two strange figures appeared in harlequin garb surmounted by death's-head masks. They skipped lightly, bounding from side to side in rhythmical precision. In a moment they were followed by couples impersonating the various protective Gods of flocks, crops and home. The worship of fecundity was plainly demonstrated by subtle movements and gestures. Next came the sacred bird, the vulture, who was received with much enthusiasm, for upon his good offices depends the ultimate happiness of any departed person, whose corpse if placed upon the mountain-side and picked clean will save the departed prolonged agony in hell.

More grotesque individuals arrived in the arena, impersonating with their amazing head-dresses unheard of and unknown animals as well as peacocks, panthers, stags and wild sheep. The heads were fearfully and wonderfully made. Next came a dragon, winding in and out of trees, and between the crowds, before it passed across the arena. It was difficult to see how it was made, but evidently the long body was a vacuum covered with many layers of harlequin paper. Inside the body were lights, upheld by men who walked beneath so that it looked as though the dragon had human legs.

Afterwards there was wild dancing by Yakandis, much resembling that of Cossacks, and last of all a satirical skit was acted, showing the Sahib who came to Ladakh for shikar, with pointed references to the laziness and inefficiency of his Kashmiri servants. I wondered if Sultana Malik was among the audience, and if so, what impression this sketch made upon him, it being obvious that Ladakhis looked upon a Kashmiri's knowledge of the mountains as laughable. Perhaps a Hungarian gipsy violinist might show the same amusement were an Englishman to attempt to play the same music as he. I did not expect Sultana Malik to have seen the point of the sketch. I had never known him see humour in anything. He was as dull as only a man of one idea can be.

The party broke up somewhere in the region of ten o'clock. The crowd in its strangely different garb dispersed, and we wandered back to the dak bungalow realizing that this had been an experience we might never know again.

"Good-bye, Sahib! Good-bye, Memsahib! The Sahib-log will come again one day!" The words rang in our ears as the next day, with a new set of ponies, we made our way once more through the main street of Leh towards the big entrance gate to take the road towards Kashmir. This time we should pause twice upon the way to search for sharpu and burrhel, and then remain perhaps for a week upon the side of a hill in Kashmir.

We looked back at the monastery and the palace towering over Leh. Noel had said to me, "Next year we'll take it easy!" I knew that to take it easy would be a concession to me. Would we? Even then, I determined to return.

CHAPTER EIGHT

NOEL HAD BEEN DISAPPOINTED IN LEH TO HEAR THAT NIMU, WHERE HE INTENDED to go to look for sharpu and the ever elusive burrhel, was by no means well spoken of. On arriving there we found the truth of this, for we spent five days during which he saw no sign of either animal. We began to believe what many people had told us, that in the summer months the old sharpu rams are the most wary of all the hill sheep, and are seldom to be found during the daytime; and that they had been known only to feed for about half an hour at dawn and dusk, and to spend the rest of the day lying up in the shade of rocks and caves where there is only the minutest possibility of seeing them. In despair Noel sent a cooli back to Leh with a wire to the Game Preservation Department in Srinagar for permission to shoot the nullah at Khalsi, the home of the first Moravian missionary we had met.

We moved on down the road by which we had come to Khalsi, and there, at the post-office, Noel found a reply to his wire giving him the permission he wanted. We remained at Khalse for one night, and were kindly invited by the missionary to pitch our tents beneath the trees in his garden. The next day Noel departed up the hill and I was left alone. During the morning the missionary came over to my tent. "Would you be interested in seeing a leper?" he asked. "I am about to treat one." Would I be interested? I was for a moment filled with horror at the thought. But I saw his eyes fixed on my face. From the expression in them I understood that this was something one should not fear, at least not in the way I feared it. I answered "Yes," almost in spite of myself. I followed him to a wall against which a creature was leaning. Where his eyes should have been, there were holes. I had never before seen anything so horrific, and there is no point in describing him further. The thing which stood out in my mind was the tremendous courage of this English physician, and the fervour and the faith which he brought to his work.

The next day we moved camp seven miles up the nullah to Skinling, and from there over a dividing mountain range to Nairmoo, where, after another precious four days of fruitless climbing and furious gazing at a sparse collection of indifferent heads of sharpu, Noel shot one of 25½ inches, the best there was amongst them.

By this time August was nearly over, and we set off hurriedly towards Kashmir so as to stake out a claim for the nullah in the Sind valley where Noel hoped to shoot a barasingh before the end of his leave. The season for these huge Kashmiri stags does not open until September 15th, but the nullahs are not numerous enough to meet the demand of those sportsmen who want them, so one has to be on one's ground early. This is particularly annoying, as it is seldom before the 26th at earliest that any of the larger stags make their appearance from their summer homes in the forests of Tillel. Only the does and the young beasts come early, and so a stalker must spend as much as a fortnight kicking his heels and ramping with impatience at the foot of his nullah before getting a shot. Noel had decided to get the Rezan nullah if he could, and we arrived at the village of that name

on the 9th to find the nullah unappropriated. From then onwards we spent a few evenings following the prints of bears among the crops, and walking every other day about six miles to fetch our mail and newspapers. As we came nearer to civilization it was odd the way the habits of years asserted themselves and such things as letters and papers began to matter.

We moved up into the upper nullah on the 15th, and pitched our camp on a little plateau surrounded by fir trees, about 500 feet below the line where the black pine forest gives way to the delicate lights and shadows of the silver birches.

I have never spent more heavenly days than on that plateau at about 7,000 feet. The tang of autumn was in the air, which smelt as though every delicious essence in the world hung in it. The inhabitants of the village in the valley below supplied us with honey and walnuts, a welcome variation to our diet. I felt fit, hard-muscled, and alive. At sun-rise every morning the beauty around us was unbelievable. The first light of the sun coloured the tops of the snow-covered mountains which lay on every side of us with the most delicate pink. Then as the ball of fire rose from its bed beneath the summit of a glacier-fringed range, the depths of the valleys below suddenly awoke to great ladder-like rays of golden light. These stretched downwards between the long rows of jet-black firs, which in turn gave birth to patches of an opalescent haze. So, with amazing rapidity night slipped away into the farthest recesses of the valley, whilst pink turned to dazzling white along the whole sky-line. A sky which put the bluest turquoise to shame.

Time was slipping by—far too fast—after the miraculous way it does when one is happy. We had to be back in Srinagar by October 1st, and perhaps—we had both lived in tents for long enough. That other life, of troops and training, of fearful social obligations, of those dinner parties to which one could not only invite those people one wanted to see—that life was still there. We should go again, all dressed up, to those Saturday race-meetings. There would be garden parties, and balls at Government House, and those dreadful women's luncheon parties at which each hostess tried to out-do another with the magnificence of the repast she offered. We should breakfast at Tollygunge club before the sweltering, humid heat of the day, ride on the race-course before breakfast, finding ourselves in such a sweat on our return that another bath was needed. And of course we should watch those paper-chases over the paddy-fields. In India, it doesn't do to show that you are bored; deadly, sickeningly bored with all this. At heart you may be a rebel, but you mustn't show it. That would look too much like taking up an attitude of superiority. It is the life you have to live, for the present at any rate, and so you must make the best of it. It is always stupid to adopt the attitude of King Canute, wasting thought and energy on waves that will not recede. If they engulf you for a time, there will be escape one day.

On September 22nd the first fall of snow arrived as low as our camp, and the maidan above us was a foot deep under its soft covering. Noel shot his first barasingh one morning after an uninteresting stalk, The head was a poor specimen, and as the limit he could shoot was two, he must make no mistake about his next one. He now had only two days left in which to get it, and the atmosphere of our camp became tense.

More snow fell, and now lay permanently around our tents in the forest, and then, on September 26th, came the Day.

(*Extract from Noel's diary.*)

"Having installed myself on my usual rock, and spied without result in every direction, I sent Sultana Malik away up another 400 feet to a place from where he could see right into some small nullahs which were invisible from below. About half an hour after his departure, I saw him through my telescope, right away above me and making violent signs to me, clearly indicating that he had seen something which I was to go up and look at, too. Off I went—up and up over snow-covered rocks and a slope which rapidly approached more nearly to 70 degrees than 45. Several times, puffing and blowing, I halted for breath and looked hopefuly upwards, but still the crouching figure signalled to me in such a way that there was no mistaking the urgency of the situation. By this time I was probably a good 10,000 feet above sea level, but the greater heights to which I had climbed in Ladakh had tried me far less. At last I joined Sultana Malik, and cautiously peering round the edge of his sheltering rock, I saw appearing over the slope of the next ridge of the spur on which we were—at a distance of about 200 yards—a pair of the most magnificent 'Tops' which I had ever imagined. Evidently the stag was asleep; also a person of considerable importance, for above and below him—some lying down, staring fixedly into space; some quietly grazing—were eight smaller beasts who were apparently on picket for 'His Majesty'. There was no possibility whatever of getting closer to him without alarming the others, so it was simply a question of agonized waiting to see whether he would rise from his nap and climb farther up the hill in full view, or merely disappear silently into the nullah below, taking those wonderful horns with him for ever, so far as I was concerned.

"My own position was far from ideal. I was balanced on a knife-edged ridge, endeavouring to wedge myself into a space where I could remain steady among loose and snow-covered boulders. The only spot from which I could see to shoot was fully exposed to the view of at least four of the eight scouts which I felt sure were specially detailed for his protection, consequently the slightest movement had to be avoided. Minutes passed, and it seemed to me that half an hour must have elapsed, during which I went through all the tortures of stag fever in its most virulent forms. Suddenly there was a mighty upheaval of the 'Tops', which rose slowly in the air, followed by the collossal head and body of their owner. Not one second did he pause to shake himself or look round. Slowly and majestically he set off straight up the hill in full view.

"Sultana Malik's excitement nearly caused an immediate disaster by the number of utterly unheeded instructions he gasped into my ear as I drew a bead. Only thirty yards now separated the stag from the entrance to a small pass for which he was making. My heart was going like a sledge-hammer at the sight of his immense size. It was now or never. I pressed the trigger with the fairest broadside shot that one could hope for. Surely I could not miss . . . but to all appearances the first shot passed right over his

back. Not a second to spare now, and I see him stagger to my second barrel, the thud of the bullet being easily audible in the still, clear air. Only time for a desperately fuddled reload, and another shot from my shoulder, standing upright to get the best view, and down he goes behind his sheltering ridge. I can just see the top of his back as he lies . . . it is not enough to aim at.

"Now there is an awful pause. 'Beyond him is an impassable "khud" !' said Sultana Malik in my ear. At that moment the gallant old monarch rose to his feet and staggered on. By this time I had cooled down a bit, and was sitting on a rock from which I could get a more steady rest. I let drive at him again for what I felt would be my last chance. I felt I almost saw the 450-grain bullet strike, as the great shaggy neck reeled away from what by all the known precedents should have been an instantaneously fatal shot. He made a short stumbling turn away from me and, followed by groans of despair from Sultana Malik, disappeared from view. 'The precipice is many hundred feet deep, and no sahib could pass there,' he sobbed. 'The horns will be smashed to pieces !'

"At first I swore I would not even go and see the pitiful wreckage which I knew I would find far away below me. I determined I would not even have the body removed. I swore he might lie for ever there on the hill where he had so severely worsted me, that I would leave camp that night, and Kashmir immediately and for ever.

"Then second thoughts came to me, and despite the warnings that the place was impassably steep, and that I could not possibly reach him without going a long way round, I set off in search. After a hair-raising scramble we found him a full 700 feet below the spot where he took his final plunge. The horns were dreadfully smashed and the body cut to ribbons.

"Sadly we started the work of reconstruction. Many pieces of his head were missing, which must be lying scattered over the face of that precipitous water course down which he had rolled. Sultana Malik and Samandu were, however, hopeful, and after a strenuous search which lasted all through the day fifteen pieces had been collected leaving only one 'bez' tine and a few tiny tips missing. We put them all together as well as we could, and even then, with both the beams roughly joined to the shattered tops, we measured him a full 46½ inches with twelve points and astonishingly low brow tines."

So much for the hunt.

. . . . . .

The atmosphere of our camp that night was electric. I had been waiting and wondering what in heaven's name could have happened to Noel. Never before had he been so long away. I grew fidgety, thinking of khuds and precipices; then frantic as twilight approached. I went to Rahim, and tried to find comfort in talking to him. "Sahib come back, Memsahib. Sahib come back," was all he kept saying. Then, "Sahib not fall."

"Visions"—Rahim had always had visions. Now I wanted desperately to believe in them. And then just at nightfall the party returned. All Noel said was, "The best head any man could ever hope to shoot in a life's-time—smashed to pieces !"

That night I knew he did not want my conversation.

The whole camp set out the next day to search the ground again. Amazingly the missing bez was found buried in the earth half-way down the water course. Noel's spirits rose. He could now leave the nullah with high hopes that skilful workmanship would repair the head of the grand old stag and ensure for him a fitting resting-place where he would receive the admiration and honour that were his due. We weren't disappointed over this for the head was—pending further operations upon its arrival in England—excellently repaired by Mahommed Baba, the taxidermist in Srinagar. The shattered skull was replaced by a carved wooden block, and the joins in the horn covered with putty, cunningly worked with corrugations incredibly like the real thing.

He could not be regarded as a record head, although none larger had been shot either in that or the previous year. On the other hand he was no ordinary specimen, and owing to his unusually early arrival in the nullah, the great struggle he put up against his fate, and the general magnificence of his head, he deserved the greatest respect that could be paid to him.

One more excerpt from my husband's diary will perhaps show non-sporting readers something of a sportsman's mind when once the stalk is over:

"I may be thought unduly sentimental, but once the stalk has terminated successfully and I see one of those magnificent lords of the dark fir forests and empty highlands of Central Asia dead before me, I have very definite pangs of regret. Nor do I lose them until I know I have done my best to have his head worthily set up amongst other highly prized trophies. This I think is the last and just compliment I can pay to a gallant victim."

Noel finished his diary sometime afterwards.

"So let him rest, perhaps thousands of miles away from his native forests, gazing across a smoke-filled ante-room or hall, deaf to the uproar, ignorant of the endlessly changing throng of faces as they come and go. All shall see him and praise him, and to many he will recall vivid memories of success or failure in pursuit of his kith and kin. Opposite to him hangs the great ammon from Rupski, gazing with his yellow, sleeping eyes at some distant spot across the Tibetan frontier from which he strayed. Between them the little snub-nosed antelope throws back his tapering horns as he sniffs the screaming wind which carries towards him the first snow-flakes across the 20,000-foot pass of the Lanak La. He is thinking perhaps of the warm springs of Kyam and the pleasant grazing ground to be found there.

"As I look at them almost I think I am alone. I am at the moment happier so. No longer can I mix in the shouting, scrambling *mêlée* with the subalterns (although perhaps some think I should). Not yet will I condemn myself to the dictates of three other companions, and the deliberate and considered policy which hangs on the fall of a card. I fall between those two uncomfortable stools, but am content to wander on alone with my imagination and my memories. Imagination, the goad of the ambitious. Memories—the playground of men's hearts.

"Slowly the blue mists are rising from the sleeping valley round the black fir forests, past the silver birches with their gleaming trunks—away over the grey-green open grassland. Now they turn opalescent as they greet the rising sun, whose long pink fingers come stretching out towards them, soon to be followed by the crimson dawn as it blazes above the jagged mountain top. . . . Two hundred yards of snowy nullah in front of me, and over the far edge I see them—those gigantic 'tops'. Will they never rise? Yes, he is getting up, and there he stands looking at me steadily and proudly. Nor does he deign to move. Is there a reproachful look in those great brown eyes? I think not, for I believe his spirit is still wandering through the mighty forests of Tillel, happy, and at rest, but—I wish I knew. . . . The sun is clouded over and the mist thickens. Now, silently, softly, snow begins to fall and covers the ground. Away—far away—I hear him calling, and his challenge echoes up and down the empty nullah.

"I turn in my chair slowly, silently as I think, but that big ram with the broken tip to his horn has put up his head. He has sensed danger and for uncountable minutes I 'freeze'. Now at last he looks down the nullah again, and I can crawl on a few vital yards and then take my shot. . . . Slowly the foresight is creeping up to the spot behind his shoulder, but stops halfway. He has seen me. Up goes his head with those colossal horns curling forward beyond his nose. Now he is broadside on, a perfect shot, but my rifle is lowered—held down by an invisible hand. Why doesn't he gallop off? Where have the others gone to? But see, he is throwing back his head across his shoulder as one who beckons, and now he turns slowly towards the patches of snow below the pass and the gleaming glacier beyond. Yes, he is beckoning to me to follow him there, and he is not alone. All around him I see figures, and they are beckoning too. Sultana Malik is there, and Punsook and Samandu. Many funny old men too, with pigtails showing beneath the black sheepskin flaps of their hats. Rahim with his cotton umbrella is there too. All of them are around the old ram as slowly they pass away up the nullah. With the last faint sound of their voices comes the plaintive whistle of a Ladakhi pipe played by some shepherd on a distant mountain top. The old ram turns and looks at me again unflinchingly, and I smell the scent of the wild mint crushed beneath the soles of my chaplis as I climb the hill again."

. . . . .

And so we went back; through Kangan and Ganderbal, filled with a certain excitement not untinged with sadness. At Srinagar we stayed in the hotel where people dressed for dinner. I had left a suitcase at Mahommed Baba's. I now proceeded to tidy myself up.

That evening we plunged into the vortex of Srinagar society by drinking a cocktail at the club "pier". Everyone seemed to know each other very well. Fragments of conversation floated over to us from adjacent tables. A woman had left her husband and gone away with someone else. One of the several queens of a cantonment discussed the scandal with a woman friend. "He'll never stick to her, my dear. I'll bet you ten rupees he won't marry her after the divorce is through." Ten rupees; something to bet

about—this domestic tragedy. The woman who had spoken had once herself caused a scandal. Now she was securely re-established. So re-established that she could afford to be scathing. There was no doubt of our being back.

An indignation meeting was being held at another table. Someone else's reputation was being torn to bits. Once again we told each other that the people most worth knowing in India seldom went to clubs.

"My dear, you *have* got thin! It's a shame you've missed all the fun, it's been a heavenly season." After much of this I went back to the hotel.

I said to Noel while we were changing: "I didn't spoil your sport?"

His answer is of no importance to others. He added:

"I wouldn't have taken any other woman, though," and then: "What are you smiling at?"

"I was just thinking." ("You wouldn't have brought any other woman to this God-forsaken country!") One's mood can change the sense of words.

. . . . .

I am at home in London with its dusty look of war-weariness; its battered, razed buildings, and its steadfast calm.

A woman passes me in Bond Street, leaving a whiff behind her of what is perhaps her last drain of expensive French scent, minty and aromatic. How strange that after eighteen years, in the heart of this island fortress, an evanescent trail of perfume should still take me back so swiftly to Ladakh. That it should remind me of the cheerful, grinning faces of our nonymen, of Rahim, who wrote through a "munshi" some years after our arrival in England, "My body is in the East, but my eyes and heart, Memsahib, turn always to the West." The ache to be on the road is in my heart again as I think of the mountain, peace, and that almighty silence.

THE END

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